

CHAPTER 1

The group sat around the table. Albus Dumbledore at the front, flanked by Arthur Weasley, the new minister of magic, and Minerva McGonagal. On the Right side of the table sat Tonks, who now held the position of Chief Auror. Next to her was Remus Lupin, who functioned as the dark creatures correspondent, as he himself was a werewolf. Next came a long line of red heads. Starting with Molly Weasley, who functioned in multiple purposes to the order, followed by Bill Weasley, who kept tabs on Gringott's Bank, and his brother Charlie Weasley who brought dragons into their service. At the other end of the rectangular table was the famed auror Mad Eye Moody, Mundungus Fletcher, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Dedalus Diggle, Emmeline Vance, Sturgis Podmore and yet another red head, Percy Weasley, who had assumed his father's old position in the Ministry of Muggle Artifacts after pleaing his parents forgiveness for his folly. On the right side of the table sat the last four of the Weasleys, three of which were new to the order. Ginny Weasley and her two older twin brothers Fred and George were new to the meetings, as they had only been selected at the previous meeting to join for various reasons. One was that all the rest of their family had been selected, though the other reasons were more important. George and Fred had become the Hogsmede correspondents, keeping an eye on the ongoing events from their joke shop located there. Ginny was a valuable tool in ascertaining information from the Hogwarts student body, as she was the only one in the room still in school. Next to her sat her brother Ron, who along with his partner and best friend Hermione Granger, worked as an evil fighter, just as they had since their youth. He worked as an operations tactician, putting his chess logic to good use. Hermione added her personal intellect to the team, and together they made a good team, frequently used for consultation even though they were only 18. Finally came foreign correspondents Victor Krum and Fleur Delacore, who sat beside her old head mistress, Olympus, and her husband Rebeus Hagrid. The couple functioned as correspondents with the giant population, which was used to guard Azkaban prison. Lastly was the grumpy looking professor Severus Snape, who functioned as an insider amongst the death eaters. The Order of the Phoenix sat in full numbers, prepared for another meeting, yet not quite complete, for the hero whom everyone had always expected to kill their ultimate nemesis was missing.

Harry Potter had not been heard from for three years.

Hermione could remember when Harry had disappeared. It had been the summer after their fifth year. During the first two weeks, Hermione had gotten letters from Harry, all short and of a depressed manner. It occurred to her that he was blaming himself for Sirius Black's death, and she grew increasingly concerned for him, especially as his letters stopped coming. When Ron told her that he wasn't hearing from Harry either, they decided to send an owl to Dumbledore, notifying him. Hermione could still remember his response:

Dear Mr. Weasley & Ms. Granger,
I am sorry to inform you that I have no helpful information for you. I cannot tell you whether Mr. Potter is okay or not, however, I can assure you that you shall not be seeing him this summer, or for some time after. I am sorry for the pain this may cause you, however, I ask you not to pursue the matter any further.

Sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore

Hermione had been saddened, angered and confused by the headmaster's response, and all Ron and Hermione could hope for was Harry to return soon. Hermione had not gone to see Viktor that summer, and had in fact broken off her relationship with him soon after Dumbledore's letter. She couldn't focus on Viktor when Harry was potentially dead, though she refused to even consider it. She and Ron had begun to spend a lot of time together, life without Harry was difficult, and though they had never truly moved on, they had reassembled their lives. Hermione and Ron had dated in sixth and part of seventh years, however, the closeness they had developed in Harry's absence did not compensate for their differences, and they continued to bicker as they always had.

"Let the Order of the Phoenix Commence." Dumbledore spoke, his voice as commanding and authoritative as ever. Hermione snapped out of her reverie and directed her attention to the headmaster. "Let us recap on our past actions, so that our new members may better understand this semblance. Four years ago, Lord Voldemort was reborn to power, his coming resulting in Cedric Diggory's going. The

minister of magic, Cornelius Fudge, hesitated to join in a resistance with us, and despite our best attempts to avoid it, we were powerless to Voldemort's attack on the Ministry of Magic, due to our lack of higher power amongst the ministry. 50 people died in the attack, including Cornelius himself. Since that time, as you can see, we have gotten many more helpful allies, and have succeeded in keeping the death eaters from attacking the ministry again, as well as keeping them from attacking Hogwarts. However, we have been unable to stop the murders, and the schism that has split the magic community is beyond our control, at least, as of now. That is generally all. Any questions?" As no hands went up, Dumbledore resumed.

"Now, what information has been brought to the order today?" he asked a calm to his voice that was unheard in such dark days. Usually, a person's tone was either meek, as though they expected if they spoke too loudly to the wrong person, their voice would betray their allegiance, or else it was panicky sounding, as though any minute they may be either murdered or taken prisoner by death eaters. Those who were muggle born found themselves under great risk, though all who did not support Voldemort were under great danger for their lives.

Severus Snape was the first to stand. "I have been informed by my connections within the death eater's circle that what we feared of happening has been confirmed. Voldemort is planning on opening this war into the muggle world, and will be opening concentration camps for muggles and muggle borns. The plan is in its earliest stages." His eyes darted about and he sat down.

A strangled cry escaped Mrs. Weasley's mouth. Dumbledore's eyes lost their twinkle. McGonagal went pale. Ron looked dazed, and Hermione's heart merely stopped. Things were getting worse, just when a beacon of light had seemed to be opening, things began to grow worse than ever in history. What hope was there? What hope could there ever be? Even the boy who lived lived no more. "Don't think that!" She scolded herself, forcing herself to redirect her attention to a now standing Remus Lupin.

Remus had grown older and sadder looking every year since Harry's disappearance and Sirius Black's death. It made Hermione want to

cry just to see him. Now he spoke, his voice a bit shaky. "The aurors have tracked down the location of a member of the inner circle's home. If we could put off a successful raid, we may be able to bring this death eater, Jaques Farrier under our control, and get some information out of him." Dumbledore looked up at this. "Ah, some good news Remus. What would such a raid require?" Remus looked nervous. "Well, sir, it would be very dangerous. I feel it's safe to say that casualties will be expected. We would need at least three teams of aurors led by only the best." Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I fear we have no choice but to take the risks Remus. Whom do you have in mind to lead the three squads?" "Well," Remus began hesitantly "each squad would require 5 aurors a piece. I would like to have Tonks and myself take one squad, you and Minerva take another, and Hermione and Ron take the last." Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth to protest, however Remus spoke quickly before she got the chance. "I know you don't want Ron in such a dangerous position Molly. However, the fact of the matter remains that Ron and Hermione have seen more evil than your family combined, and they also make an unbeatable team. Hermione's intellect is unmatched, and Ron happens to know more about tactics than I myself do." Mrs. Weasley's eyes were tearing up, however, she forced herself to nod consent.

Remus turned back to Dumbledore. "What do you have to say sir?" Remus asked, his voice weary. "I believe your plan is the best we've had in some time Remus. As long as all your elected leaders agree to their positions, I conclude this meeting, fully expecting another within a few days." All the leaders nodded in agreement to the plan, and Dumbledore rose to his feet. "Very well then. Keep up the good work everyone, and as my friend Moody would say, constant vigilance. Now, those elected need to formulate individual battle plans with Remus. Until we meet again, may all remain in good health and fortune." With that, the meeting was dismissed. Hermione and Ron made their way towards the door, but before they got there, Dumbledore called out to them. "Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, please make your way up to my office. I wish to speak with you."

Hermione walked about Dumbledore's office, recalling all the times she had been there. She remembered Harry describing it to her, as he had been there many times before she and Ron. Later, as head

girl, she had been there more times than she could recall. She saw looked for Godric Gryffindor's sword, however, she found the stand empty. She wasn't surprised. The sword hadn't been there for many years. She wished it was still there however. All she and Ron had to remember Harry by were pictures, though Ron often mentioned how Harry's empty bed in the dorm had often troubled him, a constant reminder of his best friend's absence, something Hermione certainly did not envy Ron for.

The door opened and Dumbledore strode in. "Please take a seat. Lemon drop?" After both refusing, Dumbledore sat behind his desk and looked both of his recently graduated students square in the eye. "I first want to be sure you both understand the dangerous implications of your assignment. You do realize you could be either killed or taken prisoner?" They both nodded with grim determination. "Very well. Now, I would like to apologize to you both. If I had a choice, I would not drag such young persons into this dangerous life. However, I have no choice and I thank you for your allegiance. I am very proud of you both. I suspect you both have a great deal of preparing to do, and will stall you no further."

He rose to his feet, signifying their dismissal, however, Hermione spoke quickly. "Is Harry dead professor? Please, I must know." Dumbledore looked sadly at the two children, after all, they were still just children. They had their best friend stolen from them at such a young age, and now they faced death themselves. He dropped his eyes. "I do not know Miss Granger. I wish I did, however, I do not. I cannot tell you anymore. Trust me when I say, that if Harry still lives, it is as I told you, best not to pursue the matter. I am truly sorry. I assure you, if he does live, he will always try to return to you."

Chapter 2

"HERMIONE!" she heard a familiar voice shout. "HARRY!" She screamed in joy, spinning around. She saw him standing there in his Gryffindor Quidditch robes, which she had always thought made him look handsome. He was grinning at her, and she flung herself into his arms, hugging him as she had long ago during their quest for the Sorcerer's Stone, as though he may soon be gone forever. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, he disappeared.

Hermione woke up in near tears. What a cruel dream she had had. To see Harry, only for him to disappear. Yet she hadn't seen recent Harry, she had seen Harry from four years ago. He'd be 19 now a whole lot taller probably, and more mature looking. She tried to picture his face but failed miserably. Hermione had tried everything to get over the loss of her best friend, as had Ron. She had wept, plenty of times she had wept, often with Ron along with her. Often they had gotten angry, downright furious, blaming Voldemort, blaming Dumbledore, blaming Harry even. If Harry had valued their friendship as much as they'd valued his, he would have come back. However, they knew it was false reasoning. Sometimes, time would pass, and it would all be okay. She would be able to make herself relax about the situation. However, it couldn't last. It wasn't like overcoming the loss of a loved one, for they did not know whether he was truly dead or not.

Hermione could hear Ron in the kitchen, though it was one o'clock in the morning. They shared a flat in Hogsmede, so they could be near Hogwarts and towards the center of the wizarding world, despite the risks. They had witnessed many attacks on their hometown. Even the Weasley Wheezes joke shop had been demolished once. Poor Fred and George had to start from scratch, though they had gotten much support. People loved their joke shop, which had gotten its real boost when they were given a bunch of money just before Harry's disappearance. The twins refused to tell anyone where the money had come from.

Hermione headed to the kitchen to see Ron. He stood staring out the window, his red hair a ruffled mess, still clothed in his pajamas (a knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a pair of flannel pajama

pants.) "Bad dreams Ron?" Hermione asked, sympathetic. Ron nodded. "I just miss him, you know. Especially with Christmas coming up. Did I ever tell you about our first Christmas at Hogwarts? Harry was so surprised to get presents, you should have seen him. It was priceless." Ron smiled just a bit, and Hermione handed him a warm mug. "Do you. think I should be over it by now Hermione?" Ron asked sheepishly, his eyes on the floor. Hermione shook her head firmly. "Harry was- is your best friend Ron. It's just. hard, that's all. Us three were inseparable, and the thought of him still being out there, it's hard to live with." Ron resumed his gaze out the window. "Are you over it Hermione?" He asked. "Not at all Ron. Not at all."

Ron spent long hours surveying maps, formulating plans, and preparing the aurors, as Hermione spent long hours in the library, researching spells and other important charms and potions to help with the mission. A week had passed, and there had been two meetings. The death eaters had made no attacks yet, they were probably too busy preparing the prison camps. The fact that the death eaters were planning prison camps was both surprising and not surprising. The fact that Voldemort had control over enough government officials and enough of an army to pull it off came as a shock to the order who thought his murders and raids had been pulled off by a relatively small ring of death eaters. Prison camps of such magnitude would require an impressive force. The fact that they planned to kill off muggles and muggle borns was not at all surprising. They would kill off all enough to cause the world to crawl to them in fear once they realized no weapons or battles could end the carnage.

Jaques Farrier was French, and Fleur had helped dig up information on him. He had been raised in a wealthy pure blood family, similar to the Malfoys, and his parents had supported Voldemort in the old days. His manor, La Noir Maison, was formerly unplottable, and few had known of its location, before the Aurors had managed to get the scoop on it. Now that they had the location, the plan was to use revealing spells once they arrived at the coordinates, and then bring in two teams from the North and South, leaving one team to secure the perimeter. They would cut off the floo network before hand, and apparition would be no problem, as Fleur had assured them it was protected by anti apparition charms anyways. The rest would be a battle. They suspected many guards and death eaters would be there,

and numerous traps as well. Every single person involved looked upon the day with dread.

The three teams met at Hogwarts the morning of the attack, and clearly, no one had slept. The commanders wore the golden robes of the order, the crest of a red phoenix embroidered to them. The aurors wore the auror's uniform, black pants, belt, and shirt, their supplies fastened in the belt, as well as in the strap that crossed their chests. They wore high black boots, and together the group of 21 looked fit for the job. They just hoped they were.

Dumbledore was the first to step into the fire place. "La Chateaux Delacour!" He shouted, and disappeared. Fleur's home was the closest friendly location to their destination, and the planned to fly from there. One by one they climbed in, well knowing it was too late to back out. As they arrived they reassembled, and headed outside to fly. It would take several hours to get there, and taking down the concealing charms put on the manor would take hours as well. They didn't plan on entering until night, which Ron was very glad about, for had assured everyone that they needed the cover of night.

Hermione watched as Ron stepped onto his broom, a firebolt like Harry had once owned. Fred and George had bought it for Ron with their summer business earnings, as a congratulations present for his making the Gryffindor team keeper. In the later years, Ron became the captain, however, while he was pleased, the position saddened him. Everyone had always thought that Harry would be the captain. Third year Richard Bright had had quite a job of filling Harry's robes, so to speak, and while he had been a good seeker, he could never match Harry's breath taking game of skill. Most everyone missed Harry, if for no other reason, quidditch wasn't quidditch without him.

Hermione on the other hand, hated to fly. She'd never been much good at it, and had always maintained that fear she'd had since second year when she and Harry flew on Buckbeak, the Hippogriff. As she mounted her own broom, a slow but dependable Silver Arrow 2000, she kicked off hard, and joined Ron. Luckily, he had promised to fly slowly beside her, which relieved her anxiety.

As they flew they tried to talk of anything but the upcoming mission. Ron tried to talk about Quidditch, which, despite the danger surrounding the wizarding world and the murders which spotted the globe, had not shut down just yet. Ron was blabbing on about rumors that when the winter season ended in a week quidditch would shut down. Hermione didn't really care to listen, and tried shifting the conversation to the goblin rebellions, however, this just led to a fight, and they continued in silence. Though Ron was her best friend in the world, they couldn't always seem to carry a conversation together, both being easily angered, stubborn, and impatient. Harry had always been an important middle ground in these aspects. He loved to talk about quidditch with Ron, but could deal with discussing other things with Hermione as well, and of course, being the boy who lived, always had some problem or other to work out with her, which kept her over working mind busy.

When they finally touched down, preparations went underway, which led them into night. Before they knew it, they were preparing to head into the most dangerous situation yet.

Harry had always been the most courageous of the three, and had kept their heads straight under tough situations. However, now that he wasn't there. It was all up to Ron and Hermione to stay cool on their own. It wasn't going too well. Ron kept biting his nails as they waited for Remus' signal which never failed to annoy Hermione. Of course, her nerves fueled her annoyance, and they began to bicker once more.

The concealment charms had been removed, and now they could see the tall black towers and walls of the castle that was La Noir Maison scraping the starlit night sky. The plan was for Tonks to shoot red sparks from her wand, and at that signal, they would cast spells to take off the anti intruder spells. Of course, as soon as they took down the charms, an alarm would sound, notifying Jacques Farrier of their intrusion. Then it would be a mad race. As Dumbledore's squad covered the perimeter, they would also cover the backs to the advancing squads. Any wrong moves, and people would die. Such a thought was a heavy burden.

The sparks flew. The mission had commenced.

Everyone has those split moments when you can barely comprehend your surroundings, when everything moves so fast, you can barely remember it afterwards. For some, it's while giving a speech, for others, it's while playing a game, or taking a test. Whatever it is, it is an occasion which we both love and hate. It's both a wonderful rush and a horrible one. Right then, all 21 people were feeling it.

They dashed towards the walls of the manor. They stopped, backs to the wall, prepared, using it as a barrier to the curses they had set off which were flying as them. No one noticed that the wall was entwined in not ivy, but Devil's Snare. They noticed soon enough, as the plant began to wrap around them. Hermione and Ron nearly laughed at the surprised yelps about them. "Where'd this come from?!" One auror screamed. "Helios Lumos!" Hermione shouted, causing the plant to retreat. "It only comes out at night. It hates sunlight." She explained. They began to cast spells to stop the barrier charms atop the wall, and then flew over them on broom stick, only to hit an invisible wall on the other side of the wall.

Hermione felt her broom crash hard, and she fell ten feet to the ground. Two others had fallen as well, one was out cold, and other groaned loudly. Ron and the other three aurors had stayed on their broomsticks, and Ron quickly landed besides her.

"Hermione!" he yelled desperately. "Hermione! Are you okay?!" It had been a long fall, but she had been quick to use her brain, and had cast a cushioning spell. The wind had just been knocked out of her. "Mmm hmm" she muttered, gasping for breath. The aurors rapidly saw to their partner's health, and soon they were up and moving.

Then came the chimaera. The creature was some of the most vicious known in the wizarding world, and all they could do for the time being, was run as fast as they could. "Who is this guy?!" Ron demanded loudly, running besides Hermione. "Enough security you think?!"

They were rapidly approaching the doors, the snarling animal on their heels. Before Hermione could stop them, one of the aurors reached for the door handle, and was thrown back ten feet, right in the path of

the Chimaera. Hermione's mind raced madly. Ron was on top of this one though. Literally.

Lunging at the creature, head of a lion, body of a goat, and tail of a dragon, he managed to startle it for long enough for the auror to get up. "FORCE THE DOOR!" Hermione yelled, knowing it could be opened no other way. She had to save Ron. His face was now bloody from a swipe of the dragon tail, and he was desperately losing the fight. Hermione personally knew that only one wizard had ever defeated the Chimera, and had died shortly afterwards. She needed to devise a plan, and fast. She couldn't defeat it, but she could drive it back. With all the strength she could muster, she shouted, "REPELIOUS!" sending the creature back in midair, just as it was about to land on Ron. It didn't go very far, it was much too strong, but it was stalled long enough for them to retreat through the now forced door.

Slamming the door behind them, Ron, who had strategized a plan through a rough sketch of a map, led the way, his face still bleeding profusely. Hermione felt greatly drained from her last spell, and trudged along. The hallways were surprisingly quiet. One could only wonder what was happening on the other side of the manor, where Remus and Remus were.

They had gotten across the wall with the same obstacles as Hermione's team, though they did not know that. They had made it to the door without the attack of a Chimera, and were attempting to force the door when a much more terrible opponent came to them.

Quickly, they were surrounded by death eaters, their masks hiding their faces. Remus felt his heart beat rapidly. "I'm too old for this" he thought, his mouth going dry as the aurors bumped into him, all backing up from their opponents, who slowly closed in on them. Wands were pointed straight at them.

"Oh god" Remus thought, "this is it. This is the end. I'm coming James, Lily, and Sirius."

Hermione, Ron and their squad madly raided the hallways. "Let's split into two groups" Hermione suggested, but Ron shook his head. "I have a feeling the corridors change here. We'll never find each

again." "Good point" Hermione agreed, and they continued to search the walls for secret passageways, and sweep the corridors for clues that people were there, or that they had left.

"What do you make of this?" An auror asked Hermione in a hurried whisper. She took a crumbled piece of parchment from him, and gazed at it for a few moments. It had part of an address on it, it appeared to be unfinished. Pointing her wand at it, she whispered, "Reveleo." The ink formed the words, "Jacques Farrier, December 2, 7:47 PM." "Farrier wrote this just ten minutes ago!" She whispered excitedly, looking up at Ron. "He's still around!"

Just as Remus prepared to hear, "Avada Kedavra" he instead heard, "ARE THERE MORE OF YOU?!" In a rough and demanding voice. Remus slowly opened his eyes to peer at the masked face. "Maybe I can stall" he thought hurriedly, and pretended to whimper and fall to his knees. He knew if he could stall enough time, Ron and Hermione would find him.

"WHO'S THE LEADER HERE?!" the voice demanded. All the aurors were too shocked by Remus' response to react. Tonks knew what Remus was up to however. "He is." Tonks said slowly, stalling as well. All the aurors knew was that everything was becoming fairly ridiculous.

"Sorry excuse for a leader." A man said, a thick French accent laced in his words. He kicked Remus hard in the ribs, and Remus doubled over in a pain that needed no faking. "Answer ze question!" The man said loudly.

"I am the leader." Remus said slowly. As the man with the French accent drew his wand, Remus began to speak quickly, "there are no others here! I swear! Look at me, I'm a cowardly old man, I just wet myself, do you think I have the courage to lie! Just don't hurt me!"

"Why waste time hurting you when I quick avada kedavra will do the job?"

The search had intensified. Now that they knew he was here, they grew more determined to find him, shaking off their prior fears. "Stop." Hermione demanded. "We need to find Tonks and Remus'

squad. We can search much better together, that is, if they've made it this far. They'd be entering from the north." Taking out her wand, she used a simple "point me", and began to head in the right direction.

Several corridors later, they had found the north entrance. They went to charge on forward, when an auror stopped them suddenly. "Wait!" The woman demanded, peering ahead. "There's death eaters out there! I think they have the others circled!"

Hermione bit her lip worriedly. "Ron! What now?" Ron looked as though he was thinking so hard he might hurt himself. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers loudly. "I've got it!" he cried. "Each side of the house has three doors. We split in two and follow the northernmost wall in opposite directions until we find the doors. Perhaps, we can sneak up on the death eaters from either side and stupefy them right there and then!"

Hermione looked skeptical, but as it was the only plan they had, they decided to follow it.

Remus was feeling shaky all over. He had stalled the best he could, and racked his brain now. He'd only really gained a few minutes, but at least no one had been killed in those minutes. He wondered what chances he had of making it out alive.

The Frenchman raised his wand at Remus. He felt every muscle in his body tense up. His heart stopped. His ear drums pounded. "Avada Kedavra" he heard, but he did not die. He remained kneeling there, alive. He opened his eyes in confusion, and the Frenchman merely laughed. Remus suddenly realized the man had aimed his wand at the auror behind him, and not actually Remus himself. A weeping auror hovered over his fallen comrade, who looked to be no more than thirty years of age. Remus recalled that the young man's name had been Evan Smith, a good man and auror, who was supposed to wed after the war. It wasn't fair.

He gazed at the Frenchman with a vengeance. "Who's next?" The man asked jovially. Then came brilliant flashes of light, and the world went dark.

Chapter 3

Ron was pleased to see his element of surprise work. He wasn't pleased to see that he had just stupefied Remus Lupin. Nor was he pleased to see the death eaters were fighting back. Ron noticed an auror fall dead beside him. A few avada kedavras were being administered, but mostly a lot of stupefies and crucios. He suspected the order members were worth as much to the death eaters alive as the death eaters were worth to them.

Chaos had seized the battle field. The death eater's captives had gotten the chance to seize their wands in the distraction, and soon everything was lit up by spells, and the only sounds were cries into the darkness of the cold night. The death eaters that fled, they let flee. Dumbledore and team would catch them on the other side of the wall. There were 15 death eaters however, and for the time being, they were outnumbered. Ron felt an "expelliarmus" hit him square in the chest, and his wand flew from his hand. Ron landed stiffly on his back, and he could hear footsteps rapidly approaching. It was too dark to see what was happening. The dried blood on his face from the chimaera half blinded him, as he searched for a place to hide, keeping low to avoid shots being fired at him. His foot hit a rock, and he tumbled forward, rolling head first down a hill. As he tumbled, his head hit a rock, and his vision faded.

The operation was running much more smoothly on the other side of the wall. The fleeing death eaters ran straight into a trap. They had taken prisoner 5 death eaters, and a semblance of two of the better aurors was formed to head over the wall and offer support.

As the aurors got over the wall, they needed a "lumos" to find their way, though they quickly used a "nox" to extinguish the light. They dare not call attention to themselves as soon as they saw what was going on. Bodies lie about, and they were unable to ascertain which were living, and which dead. In the distance, only two figures stood, a woman in gold robes, and a man in black. As they exchanged spells, it could be clearly seen that neither aimed to kill. The aurors raced to help the commander who they knew to be Hermione Granger. She

was holding her ground, but she was weary, and he had the upper hand.

Time seemed to stand still as Hermione missed blocking a spell and fell under a stupefy. The dark figure scooped her up in his arms, and enlarged a broomstick with his wand. "IMMOBULOUS!" One of the aurors shouted, but it was to no avail. The man merely ducked it, and took off through the barrier which posed no hindrance to him, who owned the castle

Jacques Farrier had escaped with Hermione Granger as prisoner.

Three hours later, Ronald Weasley awoke groggily in the hospital wing. The cuts in his head mended. He blinked hard, letting it all come back to him. "Oh god!" He thought. "I'm alive!" He tried to sit up, but his vision swam. He could see that he had been brought back to Hogwarts, probably via the portkeys they had made. He suddenly noticed that Remus was asleep in a bedside chair. "Remus!" Ron whispered hastily, but no response came. He managed to throw a pillow at him to wake him up.

"HUH?" Remus snorted loudly. "How's Ron?!" "I'm fine you big git!" Ron teased him. "How did we do?" Remus suddenly looked very sad. "Your parents should be here any minute Ron." Remus muttered, and Ron merely gapped at him. "Come on Remus! Tell me! I've got to know!" Remus slowly raised his eyes. "We captured 14 of the death eaters." Ron gasped in shock. "Fourteen! That's bloody brilliant! Who would have thought!" Seeing Remus' still saddened face, Ron knew there was more to it. "The bad news Remus?" Remus drew his breath in sharply. "We didn't get Farrier. The one man we were after, we didn't get. We lost 5 aurors in the battle. And." Remus paused to regain composure. "Haven't we had enough Ron? Haven't we had enough? First Sirius, then Harry. when will this bloody war end?" Ron raised an eyebrow at Remus. "Who was it Remus? McGonagal? Tonks? Dumbledore? God, what would we do with him? Not Dumbledore?!" Remus continued to shake his head, still covering his eyes with his hands. "Hermione, Ron. Farrier took Hermione as prisoner."

Ron fell back onto his pillow. He couldn't even muster tears. He felt color drain from him. "No." he thought. "Nononononono!"

CHAPTER 4

Hermione was revived by a sharp kick in the ribs. "UP" said a very angry, very French voice. She stood weakly, shaking all over. "Time to meet ze master. E'll be very pleased to hear what you 'ave to say. Not very pleased with you though." Holding his wand to her back, he pushed her forward, and her unsteady legs gave way, causing her to tumble to the pavement. "UP." He demanded once more. He could easily have floated her there, however her pain was so much more fun.

They walked slowly down a dark alley. Halfway down they found two trash cans. Hermione's captor began rummaging through the trash until he pulled out a black shoe. Forcing her to put her hand on it, he activated the portkey, and they were pulled away from the alley and into a small dark room.

"MARK." A mysterious voice said, and the death eater pulled up his sleeve to reveal the dark mark.

Hermione felt her stomach churn. This was bad. Very bad. She was trapped under the command of a death eater, she didn't have a wand, and he was about to bring her to the master, who she assumed was Voldemort. Worse yet, she felt ready to pass out at any moment.

"WHO IS THE WOMAN?" The voice asked.

"My prisoner." The man responded, showing the badge on her robes to the darkness.

"YOU ARE FREE TO COMMENCE."

Hermione felt her surroundings fade away, and they faded back in to reveal a very strange sight. Loud music blasted all about her. It was like some sort of surreal place, green lights flashing in the darkness, crowds of people in dark clothing all about her. A dance floor was packed with Voldemort's minions, the lower ranks she ascertained judging by their appearance. These weren't the wealthy and snobby pure bloods of the inner circle. They were the poor scum, hit men, people sent in on suicide missions, that sort of thing. They were the fools that powered Voldemort's army, and this was their sick and

twisted club. Many of the men were heavily tattooed, pierced, or else had magically enhanced hair that flashed neon colors. The women were mostly scantily clad, and had quite a few piercings or tattoos themselves.

Those who had some small amount self respect sat in the corners of the room, shifty characters who whispered and loaded on drugs and alcohol. Not that the others didn't. It was clear that drugs were a major part of this club. Bars lined the walls as well, serving bright colored wizard concoctions that shone in the dark.

The club was dirty, rough and dangerous. Hermione started to feel far more nervous than she had previously, especially as huge block headed men glared at her, seeing her robes.

Her captor had removed his mask to reveal Jacques Farrier. She had already guessed as much. No doubt he could get straight to Voldemort, as he was a member of the inner circle. With his wand to her back, he forced her up a set of dirty steps, strewn with passed out death eaters. At the top of the stairs was a casino which seemed to be in full swing. As they approached the back of the casino, two towering guards stood before a back door.

"Ah, Mister Farrier." Said a deep voice of a hooded figure, their back to them. "Zis must be ze ever mysterious Monsieur Gage. I vould love to play a few rounds with you, but I 'ave very urgent business."

The hooded Mr. Gage spun quickly on the stool he was at. As he saw the two, he dropped his glass to the floor, and it shattered. Farrier gave him an odd glance, and shoved Hermione towards the door.

"Think I could go in anyhow? Just for a few rounds? I believe Malfoy and Lestrangle are in there, I'd love the chance to test how rich their blood really is."

Farrier pulled his mouth into a half smirk. "Of course." Mr. Gage got to his feet, and though Hermione could not see his face, she judged by his tall stature, good posture, well muscled figure and deep voice that he was probably a fairly handsome young man. Another rich, snobby, pure blood she thought bitterly. Yet, he couldn't be so high in the ranks if he had to request Farrier's permission to enter the room. The

guards waved the three through after testing Farrier's identity through a few simple spells. Farrier was clearly trusted to bring whoever he wanted into that room.

The room was much cleaner and quieter, though not more comforting. Here was the casino for the inner ring members. She spotted Lucius Malfoy, and prayed to god he wouldn't see her. Yet, he did.

Standing up, the room fell silent, acknowledging the cruel look on his face. "Miss Hermione Granger? Ah, how long I have hoped to see you here!" He laughed cruelly, and Lestrangle stood up beside him. "You know this order member Lucius?" Lestrangle asked coldly, an icy glint in his eye.

"Yes, she went to school with my son. A mud blood right Miss Granger?" She tried to stare at him sternly, but felt herself shaking all over. "Damn him." She thought.

"Good find Jacques." Lucius said, looking pleased with the display he was making for his audience. "Better yet, she was Potter's little girlfriend before he went missing in action." He let out a cold little chuckle, and Hermione felt her heart race. She wanted to yell a thousand things at him. "I was never Harry's little anything" or "I hear your son makes a good ferret Lucius, wonder how you'd look" or most pressing, "where is Harry?!" However, she swallowed all these words, and Farrier shoved her forward, causing her to stumble to the ground, falling at Mr. Gage's feet, who, of course, made no move to help her up.

She suddenly felt her headache lift, as though someone had just administered a first aid spell on her. Her dizziness eased up as she got to her feet. What was going on?

"Will you please watch her Lucius? I need to talk to our lord." Lucius nodded, a sick look on his face. As Farrier turned to leave, Lucius walked lazily over to her and slapped her across the face. "For my son" he drawled, and was suddenly thrown back by some invisible force. Something really strange was going on.

"Who did that?!" Lucius yelled angrily.

"If I may Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you're merely clumsy." Said Mr. Gage, who had been sitting calmly for quite some time.

Lucius glared at him. "Did you do it? You low ranking, fraud?"

"Check to see if I have a wand."

Lucius cast a spell to search for his wand, and when he found nothing glared at him in frustration.

"No wonder you wear the hood. Only a fool wouldn't carry a wand."

Silence rang throughout the room. Clearly these two men were considered to be extremely powerful, and their standoff was creating incredible tension.

Mr. Gage lowered his hood to reveal a man much younger than Hermione suspected.

His face was half turned away from his, and all she could see was the youthful state of his skin, and his black hair which looked freshly cut.

His gaze seemed to set Lucius off, because he stumbled back a half step.

"Let's play." Mr. Gage said in a very calm tone.

Lucius' eyes narrowed, accepting the challenge.

As Lucius walked towards the back of the room, Mr. Gage turned quickly towards Hermione, catching her eye.

Her heart stopped.

Chapter 5

Hermione recognized his emerald eyes from the moment she saw them. Harry was there, in that very room with her. His scar was concealed, he looked much older, his hair was well cut, and he didn't have his glasses. Besides that, he was her Harry. The same Harry she'd seen that first day on the Hogwarts express. The same Harry she'd been missing for three years. It took everything she had not to throw her arms around him and weep. She knew she couldn't blow whatever cover it was he posed for whatever purpose. At least, she hoped it was a cover. "No, Harry will find a way out of here. He'll save me." She finally had some hope. All she could wonder was how he could actually do it. He didn't even have a wand. Maybe other help was nearby, the same help that had pushed Lucius down. It was a far stretch though.

Harry stood at a gambling table. Hermione noticed that only the most wealthy were gathered around the table. The dealer dealt out the cards, which Hermione knew would be magically enhanced to avoid cheating, as well as the dice.

A tall blonde woman in a sparkling cocktail dress came up behind Harry, wrapping her arms around his waist. Hermione wanted to punch the woman. She had no right to touch Harry. Harry looked impartial to the woman's touch. Hermione wondered if he was used to it. After all, he did seem to be rich, had an obvious air of power to him, and was undoubtedly handsome. Hermione had never thought she'd be thinking that. Sure, she'd always thought Harry was handsome in his way, but never thought she'd be attracted to him. He was always just like a brother to her. Harry whispered in the woman's ear, and she left, returning with a drink for him, which he took without so much as thank you, which was nothing like Harry. He drank, a gold and red ring glimmering on his finger. "Gryffindor colors" she thought.

"The name of the game is poker." The dealer said, as the men (and one woman who had just joined), piled galleons and sickles out onto the table to play. Hermione could immediately see the stakes would be high. Before things even really got going, half the table had folded, and now it was just Harry, Lucius and the woman playing.

Hermione (who was chained to the wall by one of the employees) was growing restless. What was Harry waiting for? She got a sick feeling in her stomach that he had turned sides, and was going to let her go to Voldemort. He was certainly taking his sweet time gambling with Lucius. The woman had now folded, and now the war was between Lucius and Harry. Harry maintained such poise, she was starting to second guess herself. Was this even Harry? The stakes were set at 5,000 Galleons, and Lucius finally, after a long line of profanities folded, stating that his bluff wasn't worth it, he only had two pair. Harry laughed in a cold way she'd never heard him laugh, and revealed one pair.

That was Lucius' last straw. He pulled out his wand quickly, and Hermione felt time freeze. Imagine if she were to find Harry alive after four years, only to have him be murdered before her eyes. The light suddenly went out, and many shouts sounded. Hermione could hear her heart race. What was happening? Everything was so strange, she couldn't understand it. She felt her chains go loose, and an arm fasten itself around her. "LUMOS!" She could hear people shouting, and she knew that soon they would see what was happening. The lights came on, but people gazed right through her.

"WHERE'D SHE GO!" Lucius screamed. As he frantically looked about "GAGE TOOK HER! THAT FRAUD BASTARD!"

"They must of apparated!" a chubby, balding man exclaimed.

"YOU CAN'T APPARATE OUT OF HERE IDIOT!" Lucius screamed, "They have to be around her somewhere! Alert the guards not to let anyone in or out until we find them! YOU'RE TRAPPED A GAGE! HEAR ME?! TRAPPED!"

"So says you." Harry whispered in her ear, and she couldn't help but smile. Being this close to Harry, knowing he was alive, and once again, hiding under the invisibility cloak. "This way" he whispered, and they slowly made their way through the chaos, avoiding bumping into people.

They continued until they got to a men's bathroom. Hermione felt utterly confused, but followed him in anyways. After locking the door,

and checking to make sure there was no one there, he took the cloak off and explained.

"It's the only place along the exterior wall of the building we can get a moments chance to escape. Okay here's my broom" he said, enlarging a strange looking broom from his pocket, and handing it to her. "Once I break through this wall, the alarms will be set off, and we'll only have ten seconds to be off. I'll probably be exhausted, so, I'll have to jump on the back, and you'll have to kick off and steer us away. Got it?" She nodded, confused by so many things, but not having the time to ask. She noticed that he hadn't met her eye since he had revealed himself to her in the casino. She decided to ponder it all later. Harry opened a stall door, and placed his hands on the wall. Closing his eyes, he seemed to be concentrating. Suddenly, the wall blew apart, sending him flying into the sink, breaking it in half. Before Hermione had a chance to exclaim, Harry had slowly risen to his feet, covered in plaster, his face pale. Slumping onto the broom stick, and resting his head on her shoulder, Hermione threw her mind into focus mode, and kicked off hard, the broom sped out of the building so fast she thought she'd faint. She could barely get a hold of controlling it, and she felt herself panicking. "Harry!" She cried desperately, and he seemed to have come to a bit more, and wrapped his arm weakly around her waist, and placing his fingers on an odd gold disk in the front, muttered, "Gryffindor Manor."

As they sped off, a cursing Lucius was left standing in a very wrecked bathroom.

Harry had been spending months undercover at the death eater's club, through some very sneaky and dirty work. He had been keeping tabs on all the big wigs of the inner circle. The work had been slow, and seldom gratifying. One thing he had not expected to see was his best friend Hermione Granger enter under the custody of Jacques Farrier.

Seeing her had been an incredible initial shock, but he had over come it, as he had been taught. He had missed his friends desperately, but loneliness he could deal with, he had grown up lonely. He could not bear grief and guilt however. It had almost ruined him once already, and Hermione's death and pain would kill him. He

had separated himself from the fact that he knew his absence would hurt his friends, and he knew he would have to see it if he were to help Hermione. He carefully devised his plan as Lucius made his scene, and had done a good job of remaining calm throughout Lucius' tirade.

Of course, he had lost it for a moment when Lucius slapped Hermione. That dirty jerk had no right to come within a mile of her, and he couldn't bare to watch Hermione's pain. Lucius was just lucky Harry hadn't thrown him through the wall.

Harry had bid his time, something he had gotten very accomplished at. He had waited until just the right moment to make his move.

Luckily, it had all worked. Of course, now he was drained, had a very flustered Hermione on his hands, had lost his spy position, had angry death eaters on his trail, and had a heck of a lot of explaining to do. For now, he was just tired.

Ron had just laid there, staring at the ceiling for the past hour. His family couldn't get into him, and neither could any of the professors. The fact that he had just potentially lost a second best friend was incomprehensible.

Dumbledore said that everything was being done to track her down, that all records had been scoured, that all the spies and aurors were out, but Ron knew the truth.

Four hours had passed since her kidnapping, done by a highly dangerous death eater of the inner circle. She was either dead or being tortured. And Ron really didn't want to think about it.

Hermione was exhausted as they arrived in a large empty field in the middle of a forest. Harry clumsily made his way to the ground, and helped Hermione down.

"Harry, um, why are we in the middle of an empty field?" She asked worriedly.

"It's not an empty field. This is Gryffindor Manor." He answered dully. "Here, I'll show you." He raised his hand to her eyes, which dropped

closed, and he whispered, "Apperell Gryffindor." When she opened her eyes, a massive mansion appeared before her eyes. High black gates secured the perimeter, bushes on the other side, white marble columns were situated along in the fence corners, and on either side of the fancy entrance gate, which read, "Gryffindor Manor" atop the entrance. Atop each column were golden lion statues which growled to warn off unwanted guests.

Harry ran his hand down the gate, and it swung open to omit the two. They walked tiredly along the path leading to the massive estate. The gates swung closed behind them. Hermione could see lions prowling the lawns in the distance.

"Uh. Lions Harry?" She asked wearily.

"They just guard the manor. They won't attack you so long as I tell them not to."

As they arrived at the entrance doors, Hermione gapped at their massive size, and the fine stain glass that decorated them, a patchwork of red and gold pieces that wormed the word "Gryffindor" on both widows, and showed a lion.

Harry opened these the same way he opened the gate, and they entered a massive entrance hall.

"I'll give you the grand tour tomorrow" Harry told her, leaning his broom against the wall. "Come on, I'll show you to a room you can stay in."

"Uh, Harry, why didn't we go to Hogwarts? People will be worrying about me!"

"Which is why you'll have to send them a quick letter saying that you're fine, you met up with an old friend who helped you, and you'll owl them more details when you're feeling better." He paused uncomfortably. "I have a lot to explain before you go back."

"You can say that again."

"Here's your room" he said, opened a door off the corridor he had led her down. Behind it was a cozy red and gold room, which he had a quick fire blazing in. "The house elves can get you something to change into, probably some pajamas of mine, sorry I don't have anything better. Ask them for food if you're hungry, they live to serve, literally."

"House elves?!" Hermione exclaimed with a tone of shock.

Harry smiled sheepishly. "I couldn't have people knowing of my existence or whereabouts, so I hired house elves. Don't worry, I make sure they have everything they want. Even ask them."

"I will." Hermione said, feigning irritation.

"Sleep well." Harry said, still avoiding her eyes, turning his back to go.

"Wait Harry!" She cried, standing up quickly. She ran to him, and threw her arms around him. He hugged her back, and she bit back her tears. "I've missed you so much Harry, you have no idea. Ron too. Life's been hell without you. I'm so glad your okay."

Harry felt his heart shattering. "We'll talk tomorrow" was all he could say.

He left her standing there, still fighting her tears.

Chapter 6

Harry wasn't going to be able to sleep, despite his fatigue. Which was really okay, he didn't usually sleep much anyhow. First, he had to see to the house elves about checking up on Hermione, and mending his wounds. He was fairly sure he had fractured his collar bone, and had a good gash in his side.

Cuts were something house elves could mend quite well. Harry had found from much experience that fractures and breaks were another thing. He had discovered the need to either seek medical aid, or else let it heal the old fashion way. He hoped Hermione might know how to fix it for him.

He sent Hermione one of his female house elves, Ella, and let the house elves heal his cut. Unfortunately, he could not lift his left arm, and so moving his shirt was difficult. They then brought him a button up blouse, so that he wouldn't have to lift his arm to put it on.

Harry headed up to his room, across the hall from Hermione's. He opened the thick oak double doors with one arm, and headed into the dark room. The house elves already had a fire blazing, but it barely lit the dark room.

The room was easily his favorite. It had tall blood red stain glass windows with the Gryffindor crest, several book cases, a large desk which was currently covered in papers, black leather couches around a fire, and an enormous four post bed.

Harry flopped down in front of the fire, having grabbed a small vial off the shelf first, which he now downed. Harry had at least twenty of them made, they were his personally brewed pain numbing potions.

Harry stared into the flames, and emerged himself in his thoughts.

Shortly after Harry left, a tidy little house elf in a nice house elf dress came to Hermione's room.

"My name is Ella miss!" The elf squeaked merrily, handing Hermione a well pressed and cleaned pair own what were obviously Harry's pajamas. "What would you like to eat miss?" The elf inquired politely.

"Maybe just some tea?" Hermione asked, seeing Harry clearly had been good to his servants.

The elf scuttled off as Hermione changed. She couldn't help but notice the way they smelled just like Harry, the way she had always remembered him smelling. There was no distinct way to describe it, it was just so characteristically Harry. She smiled to realize how close she was to him, alive and well. She wrote a brief note to Ron and left it for the house elf to bring to Harry to owl.

The elf returned with a tray, and placed it on Hermione's bedside table as Hermione cleaned up in a wash basin in the room corner.

"So, how does Harry treat you?" Hermione asked, half joking.

The house elf piped up merrily. "Oh, us house elves couldn't ask for better! He tells us we can have anything we want, which isn't much mind you, but he gets us lovely things! Things we didn't even ask for! We all have our own rooms, and he tells us if ever we should like to join him for dinner, we are welcome! Of course, we almost never be asking! Only if he's been closed up for along time, and we house elves vote that it's for the best to have him come out."

"Closed up?" Hermione asked with confusion.

"Ah yes, mam, see Mr. Potter is the best master any of us house elves could ask for, but he's a very sad man, very very sad. He closes himself up in his room for weeks sometimes, and often leaves for weeks, usually to return hurt. He asks us never to leave the manor grounds, and if we be wanting to leave, which we never do, he has to memory charm us. He is very secretive."

Hermione was confused by this news. As the house elf left, Hermione tucked herself into bed, her mind spinning.

"What's happened to you all these years Harry?"

Two hours had passed, and Harry had moved to the window sill, where he fastened Hermione's note to Ron to one of his messenger birds. He couldn't use Hedwig anymore, she was far too noticeable.

Harry watched the bird fly away, when he heard a small rapping on his door.

He opened it to find Ella standing there, looking pleased with herself. "Miss Granger is going to bed sir!" Ella said happily, and Harry nodded, signifying her dismissal.

All the rooms in Gryffindor Manor had silence charms, however, the rightful owner of the manor, the one who wore the ring of Gryffindor, could hear through them. Harry decided to have a listen to see if Hermione had fallen asleep yet.

Putting his hand on the door, he listened for any movement. To his dismay, he realized that she was moving about quite a bit, tossing and turning in her bed, and muttering incoherently. She was obviously having a nightmare, which was really no surprise. She had been taken prisoner by an inner circle death eater, brought into one of the most horrible clubs on the planet, and nearly taken to Voldemort, where she would have been tortured and killed.

He slowly opened the door, and saw her kicking about under the covers. Crossing the room, he sat beside her on the bed, and gently shook her half awake. "Harry?" She muttered, still looking bewildered.

"I'm here." He said softly, and she relaxed back onto the bed, grabbing his hand to hold. As she fell back asleep, Harry watched her now peaceful rest. He had missed her and Ron much over the past years, and had doubted he'd ever live to see them again. Often he'd wondered how they had changed, if they were alive, if they were okay. He had managed to gain occasional information on them, but only enough to find out that they were healthy, or that Ron had made captain, Hermione had made head girl. Little bits of information that he appreciated, but never what he really wanted to know.

What he wanted to know was if Ron still turned bright red when he was flustered, if Hermione had read "Hogwarts: A History" again, if they still had their little fights, if they had gone to the Hogwarts Balls,

and whom they had gone with, whether or not Ron had found that last chocolate frog card, and if they were happy.

Harry had often wondered what they looked like now. He imagined Ron was quite tall, still red headed and freckly, but it was Hermione he had more trouble envisioning. He could see that she had grown quite beautiful over the past four years, more so than he would have expected, though she still looked like is same old Hermione. She still had that same knowledgeable tone behind her words.

He watched her for some time before leaving.

Hermione awoke early the next morning, in the hours when the sky is still gray, and the outcome of the day in ominous, hanging out there, somewhere in the foggy mist that rises from the grass.

Her clothes had been cleaned and pressed, and sat folded on the bedside table. She dressed quickly, and headed out to find Harry.

She found him sitting on the grand staircase leading down into the main entrance hall. He had on a silver blouse which she could immediately tell was of a fine quality, and he was wearing well pressed black slacks, a black belt holding them up. He had rimless glasses on, and his scar was back. His presence felt even more real.

He was certainly a smart dresser, and she wondered when that had happened. Before, he couldn't seem to care less about his appearance. His shoulders were much broader, and he had evidently been working out hard, judging by his muscles.

Harry gave her a small smile as she came down the stairs, though it didn't meet his eyes, which had a haunting sadness to them, similar to Sirius' after he'd escaped Azkaban.

"Well, let's go eat breakfast." Harry sighed. "We have a lot to talk about."

They sat down to a large breakfast at a long table in an enormous dining room which reminded Hermione strongly of the great hall.

Hermione, who had never been patient when it came to knowing things, always having to soak up information as fast as possible, felt ready to explode with anticipation. Harry on the other hand, had a collectedness about him that added to her frustration. He took his time sitting down, moved slowly.

Finally, he spoke. "First you ask questions, and I'll answer, then we'll switch."

She nodded, and immediately burst out with, "Where have you been the past three years?"

"Good place to start." Harry said calmly, slowly scooping out some porridge onto his plate.

"After I returned to the Dursleys, I was a wreck of nerves. I fully blamed myself for Sirius' death, and was falling apart with the thought of losing someone else at my cost. I began to plan how I could avoid hurting either the Weasleys or yourself. I decided to run away, to hide, perhaps live like a Muggle until Voldemort came for me. I felt fully prepared to die, so long as no one else was hurt. I went to run from the Dursleys, but Dumbledore headed me off. He found me before the Knight Bus could get there, and demanded I come with him to Hogwarts at once. Upon arriving there, he sat me down in his office, and set my mind clear."

"Set your mind clear about what Harry?"

"Why I was such a threat to Voldemort. You see Hermione, there was a prophecy made involving Voldemort and I. The prophecy he was trying to obtain that day that Sirius was killed. The prophecy said that there'd be a battle between Voldemort and myself, and that one of us would die. All this I already knew, but I didn't see how I could defeat Voldemort, and my best hope was to run away to protect others and wait for Voldemort to come to me. However, Dumbledore had something else in mind. He told me that if I refused to stay at Hogwarts then the most I could do was continue my training. He gave me a contact to develop my skills and from my mentor I learned powerful ancient magic."

Harry paused as Hermione took it all in.

"So you used ancient magic to push Lucius back, fix my headache, put out the lights in the club, and blow that wall up?"

Harry nodded. "Trust me, it was all very draining. It's the same effect as you doing all those things with a wand. It takes a lot of energy. The only difference is that I can do it without a wand, movement or incantation, which as you imagine can be very dangerous to opponents, especially since they can't disarm me."

"So what did you do when you disappeared after that?"

Harry looked greatly saddened when she asked this. "I started on a dark life. I began to fight back against Voldemort and his followers in my own secret way. Both Dumbledore and I knew I was starting on a dangerous path, and that I could never maintain any contact with my past again."

Hermione felt a terrible aching pity for Harry. Having to choose a life of isolation and danger at age 15.

"When I met with the contact I was trained to use ancient magic for the next year. We moved around a lot, to keep death eaters off our trail."

She finally understood what Dumbledore meant about staying off Harry's trail for his own safety. If they found Harry, the death eaters would find him as well.

"I learned to battle both magically and physically. I had a rigorous work out routine, and I also learned tricks of spying. I began to wear contacts when out, and covering my scar with Muggle makeup. Between that, the working out, and the aging, no one recognized me."

"That explains his changed appearance yesterday." Hermione thought.

"I've had to transform my instincts, and have mastered developing another persona."

"That explains his strange manner yesterday." She thought. Yet, it didn't explain the sad look in his eyes, why he locked himself up in his room, and why he felt so distant.

"The next three years were spent fighting crime, spying, fighting. That's generally all."

"No its not Harry. I mean what sort of fighting? Where have you been? What have you seen? I'm not stupid Harry, you're different."

Harry looked even sadder. "Hermione- I- It's nothing."

"What does that mean?" Hermione asked frustrated. Hermione had answers to about a thousand of the questions she had been pondering the past four years, but now, the most perplexing one of all he avoided. She had found her best friend, whom so many had taken for dead, and yet he wasn't the same person she remembered. No training could take away the mischievous glint in Harry's eye, his soft charming manner, and cover up that innocent simplicity that was Harry.

Harry looked flustered. "Hermione, I never planned on having to say any of this. I figured I would be dead before I saw anyone again."

"Well, as convenient as that may have been for you Harry, I need to know!"

"Why Hermione?! Why do you have to know everything?! This isn't some bloody lesson for you to learn! This is my life, and its not one I particularly feel like digging up!"

Hermione could never have imagined that when she finally found Harry, they would spend their first day together fighting. She bit her lip to hold back the pain that his words brought.

"I'm sorry Hermione" Harry said softly, a bit of his old self arising. "It's just not a thing I particularly like to think about."

And yet it was all he could think about. In all those long hours locked up in his room, he sat there, trying to overcome the pain of his past,

trying not to wish desperately Ron or Hermione were there to help him overcome his pain.

"Please Harry, just tell me. Tell me, so we can get past this!"

Harry heard the sincerity in her voice, and gave in, as he had secretly been needing to do all along.

Harry revealed to her his long hours spent in the night, tracking death eaters, tipping off aurors. He told her about midnight scuffles, when an enemy would pop up on him, when he would be sent running through the darkness alone, a shadow chasing him. His fights when that shadow caught up, the times he had had to kill, the times he had been beaten an inch from life. He told her about the bloody scenes he'd come across, innocent men women and children killed by death eaters. He recalled for her the many times when he had needed to hide his emotions, or even pretend to be pleased by a death eaters disgusting handy work so that he wouldn't give away his allegiance. He had used his wealth, power, strength and even his looks to get what he needed. He had been tortured, threatened, had slept on the streets, missed several days of sleep at a time, failed to gain his objective, failed to save lives. All this, and he was only 19. It was no surprise he had changed.

Hermione swallowed back her tears, tears of anguish, sorrow, anger and hate. She would never have thought that this would be Harry's fate. Yet it was, and it was time to move on.

Chapter 7

Harry lifted his ringed finger. "The crest of the heir of Gryffindor" he explained. "Along the way in my journey I discovered that I'm the heir of Godric Gryffindor. I've inherited all that was Godric Gryffindor's, it turns out that no one in my family blood line has known about this for hundreds of years, I guess it became lost knowledge. But the mansion, the money, the furnishings, so on and so forth all belonged to him at one time. The ring shows ownership. As you can imagine it was a big shock when all this was told to me. And now, tell me about Hogwarts after I left."

Hermione proceeded to tell him all the main things all the way up to becoming members of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Wow" Harry laughed, "I remember when they wouldn't let Fred and George become members, and now they're letting Ginny."

"Yes, they've changed their tune a bit since. well, you know,"

"Sirius' death." Harry said dully, and she nodded in response. "They shouldn't have kept us in the dark for so long. That whole incident may never have occurred if it hadn't been for them treating us like children."

"We were children Harry." Hermione responded.

"No we weren't. After the Sorcerer's Stone our childhood ended."

Hermione looked ready to respond, but bit her lip.

"And you and Ron went out for two years?!" Harry suddenly exclaimed.

"Don't act so bloody surprised Harry!" Hermione laughed, "After all you were gone and all we had was each other. We still fought way too much though, and we were both glad when it ended."

Harry gave her a sideways look for a moment, and then asked, "So, are either of you back off the singles market?"

"No, not me, but Ron. well he's going out with Cho Chang." She eyed Harry with concern, but Harry just laughed. "Don't worry Hermione, no attached feelings there. If Ron likes a girl who's always crying and acting self contradicting than good for him."

Hermione chuckled at this. "He does actually, that's just the thing. I think he likes being the hero, the comforter. On a more serious note Harry, when are you coming back? Everyone misses you so much, Ron, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Remus, even Cho who felt awful about the way your relationship with her ended before you disappeared."

"I bet she did a lot of crying about that" Harry quipped, and Hermione just rolled her eyes.

"Anyways, just answer my question." She said back.

Harry leaned back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head. "Well, I don't plan on going back until I take Voldemort down."

"Harry, no one knows where he is, it could take you years to find him!"

"Well, I was getting close until a certain someone showed up and blew my cover."

Hermione blushed and looked away. "How did you get in there anyways?"

Harry blushed this time. "Bribes mostly, but it turns out that some of the female death eaters fancied me, which was a big help."

Hermione wasn't surprised by this, and she chose not to comment and pursued her previous course of questioning instead. "Harry, we miss you too much for you to just disappear again, and besides, cat's sort of out of the bag now that I 'blew you cover' back at the club isn't it?"

Harry shook his head. "They know that Mr. Gage was a traitor, what they don't know is that Harry Potter is still alive."

Hermione sighed loudly. He had to come back, he just had to, "Listen Harry, it's not just your friends who want you, the Order needs you too. The death eaters are planning to build prison camps for Muggles and Muggle borns."

"I know." Harry replied dully.

Hermione could feel her face heating up. She stood up quickly, knocking her chair over in the process. "Is that all you can say? I know?! In case you've forgotten Harry Potter, I'm Muggle born, and my whole family is made up of Muggles! Maybe you don't care anymore what happens to me and my family, and all you care about is your personal vendetta with Voldemort. Is that it?"

Harry tried to protest, but Hermione would have none of it. She spun quickly on her heel and stormed off. Harry slumped back into his chair and ran his hand through his hair. He suddenly realized he'd forgotten to ask Hermione about his shoulder injury. "I suppose she won't be wanting to help you now you dumb prat." He thought angrily, and decided to sulk for a while Hermione cooled down.

Ron would not eat breakfast despite his mother's protests. His stomach was a churn of worries, and he couldn't think straight. He had urged his family to leave him in peace on his hospital bed for a few hours, and the door suddenly opened again.

"I said to go home. I need rest and so do you." Ron stopped when he realized it was not one of his red headed family members, but rather his gorgeous girlfriend Cho Chang. "Oh it's you Cho-" all too soon the girl was throwing herself into his arms and weeping.

"Oh Ron, I was so worried! I got here as quick as I could, you know how hard it is to just take off in the middle of a Quidditch series, and we were playing the."

Ron put a finger over Cho's mouth to silence her. "Yes, yes I understand." He whispered.

"What's wrong Ron?" Cho asked, noticing the troubled look on his face.

"It's Hermione." He responded sadly, laying back.

"The death eater Jacques Farrier took her prisoner last night." Cho gasped and buried her face against his chest. She had decided that she wouldn't make the same jealous mistakes with Ron that she had made with Harry, though it did bother her that Ron still shared an apartment with Hermione, and she hoped to get him moved out and in with her soon.

"I'm so sorry Ron!" She whispered, kissing him on the cheek. He was stiff and lifeless, and she felt deeply concerned. "Ron, have you." She was cut off as an owl suddenly fluttered through the window and landed next to Ron's hospital bed.

"Get the note!" Ron said excitedly, and Cho quickly took the letter and handed it to Ron. Ripping it open, Ron read quickly:

Dear Ron,
I'm sure you've been worrying, and I'm sorry to have caused so much alarm. After I was kidnapped, Jacques Farrier took me to a death eater club, and was going to bring me to Voldemort, but I met up with a friend who was there undercover and saved me. I'm safe with them now, and I'll be returning ASAP, once we've cleared a few things up. Relay this message to everyone, and I promise to clarify when I get back.

With love,
Hermione

Ron breathed out a deep sigh of relief and quickly checked the parchment with a spell to be sure Hermione had in fact been the sender. Grinning, he turned to Cho. "She's alright."

Chapter 8

"It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are. Far more than our abilities."

-Albus Dumbledore "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets"

Harry knocked tentatively on the bedroom door of where Hermione was staying. "Hermione, can I please come in?"

"Fine." Was her muffled response, and he entered slowly.

"Listen, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean it that way, it's not that I don't care. Trust me I do care. Above all else I care about you and Ron. The whole thing is just complicated. I need time to think." Hermione, who had been turned away from him the whole time turned back to look at him. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. "I am sorry" he said meekly, stepping closer to her.

Suddenly and unexpectedly she threw her arms around him and buried her face against his chest. It took him a moment to respond, but he finally drew her up into his arms, resting his chin on the top of her head. "I'm sorry too Harry." She said, not leaving his warm embrace. "It's all just overwhelming."

"I know the feeling" he whispered softly, wincing as she bumped the bruise on his collar bone where it was fractured.

"What's wrong Harry?" She asked, drawing back to examine him.

"I've been meaning to tell you, I think I fractured my collar bone yesterday. Do you know any healing spells?" "Of course Harry, you should have asked earlier! Sit down!"

Harry did as commanded, and began to unbutton his blouse. He slipped it off his injured shoulder and handed her his wand.

"Why do you carry your wand if you don't need it Harry?" She said puzzled. He shrugged his good shoulder unable to think of an actual reason. She shook her head at him and set to work.

"This probably won't work as well as usual since I don't have my wand, but it should work all the same, maybe it'll just leave a little bruise."

"That's fine." Harry responded, getting a slightly tingly feeling where Hermione had her hand rested on his bare chest.

He wasn't the only one feeling it. "Concentrate Hermione." She scolded herself, recalling the spell she needed.

Once she was done, Harry stood up and tested his arm out. "Good as new." He proclaimed, giving her a small grin that made her feel the tingly sensation all over her body this time. "What would you say to going for a walk?" He asked.

"Of course" she said, returning his grin.

It was noon and Ron had already spread the news from Hermione to everyone. Now he was seated in Dumbledore's office with the rest of the operatives from the Order of the Phoenix. He couldn't help but grin as they all gathered, and his mother nodded approvingly as he ate while waiting for the meeting to commence.

Dumbledore entered the room and took a seat. "Good afternoon everyone, I'm sure we are all pleased to hear that Ms. Granger is indeed safe."

"Who do you reckon recovered her Albus?" Tonks asked while running her fingers through her hair, which was spiked and baby blue today.

"Of that I am not sure Tonks." Dumbledore answered, a glint in his eye.

"But you have an idea don't you?" Ron asked surprising everyone at the table with his sudden outburst.

Dumbledore trained his deep blue eyes on Ron, and responded, "I do not wish to raise any false hopes here, but I believe that our unnamed savior was Mr. Harry Potter."

A loud crash filled the office. Ronald Weasley had fallen to the ground. When he stood up his face was beat red and he quickly pulled his chair back upright from the floor.

"Do you really mean it Head Master?" Ginny asked softly from her place at the table. She had long since gotten over her crush with Harry, and was still dating Dean Thomas. She still loved Harry like a brother though.

"I am not sure of it Ms. Weasley, but it does seem to fit."

"How so?" said an icy voice from the other end of the table. Everyone turned to see that the greasy headed professor Snape had just joined them.

"Who else do we know who has remained secret and anonymous even to us, and could bust a valuable prisoner from a club of death eaters?" Dumbledore's eyes sparkled a bit. "But enough of this, we cannot risk speculation. What do we have to discuss today?"

They day had turned out cloudy and snowy, which suited Hermione just fine. She always loved the snow, it reminded her of her day of youthful ignorance. A world where Voldemort didn't exist, there was no dark magic, and she wasn't falling for Harry Potter. It was ridiculous and she knew it. She had just met back up with Harry after three years and he had changed drastically. They both had, and yet here she was falling for him. It wasn't as though she hadn't always carried a small torch for Harry somewhere in her heart, after all, he was brave, humble and well mannered. Ever since the day he had thrown himself onto the club of mountain troll to save her she had a small crush on him, but nothing pressing, nothing like this.

Suddenly a snow ball whizzed out of no where and hit Hermione square in the back. She spun around to see Harry leaning against a tree like nothing had happened. "Oh.you." she made a snowball and whipped it back at him but he dodged it.

Their game carried on for quite a while, and Harry felt good for the first time in a long time. Memories of the past scarring his brain disappeared for a while as a he submerged himself in this childlike behavior. Finally Hermione flopped onto her back in the snow

exhausted. "I take this as an 'I surrender'?" He laughed walking over to her.

"Think again Potter!" She yelled, and grabbing his leg she pulled it out from under him causing him to crash down into the snow. Laughing and breathing heavy he raised his arms and proclaimed his surrender. Still sniggering Hermione crawled over beside him and rested her head on his chest.

Laying in silence they watched the snow fall upon them, cascading down from the gray sky, each flake making its own swirling path down to earth. Harry sighed deeply. Despite what he may have been trying to convince himself, he had missed his friends desperately, and nothing in the world seemed better than laying in the snow with Hermione resting against him.

The meeting didn't end as cheerfully as when it had begun. The main topic discussed by the Order had been the death eater's movements to form the Prison camps, which was still vastly unknown. The meeting had ended with a tribute to the dead aurors who had been killed in action the day before. Overall, Ron was feeling pretty crappy by the time he got back to his flat. He felt lonely there alone and hoped Hermione would be getting back soon. Harry too for that matter, if he had in fact saved Hermione. Ron truly hoped so. It seemed too good to be real that his best mate may be coming back again. He couldn't even imagine the reunion. "What will Harry be like after three years?" He wondered, sinking down into his favorite armchair with a steaming mug of tea. He was just ready to take a sip when there was a knock on the door. "Proabably Cho" he thought.

Sure enough Cho was on the other side of the door when he opened it. He let her in and asked her if she wanted some tea, which she declined. "I really have to be off and running again." She explained quickly. "I'm in the middle of the European Quidditch Cup series against the Tutshill Tornados, as you already know, and I need to get back." He pretended to be upset by making a puppy dog face at her and whimpering, but she would have none of it. "I need to get going. Take care Ron." Cho kissed him good bye, and headed for the door. "I'll be rooting for Puddlemere United!" He called after her before she got out the door. "You better be boy! If you have any clue about

what's good for you!" He laughed and quickly retorted, "You know, I'm only rooting for them because their seeker is drop dead gorgeous." Cho sniggered at this, and kissed him again. "I'll tell her you think so." With that she was gone, and Ron went back to his tea which was now had cooled down.

Hermione was in her room drying off and settling down for the night. She told Harry she had to leave in the morning, and he promised to activate the flo network for her, another tricky feature of his mansion. The flo network could be turned on and off. Hermione wished she could be peacefully settling down for bed but she just couldn't help but fret. Harry probably wouldn't go with her in the morning, and she may never see him again. As quickly as she found him she may lose him. Further troubling was the fact that she couldn't lose her new feelings for him quite so quickly. On top of everything else was the confusion brought on by those feelings. They had come on so quickly and randomly. Sure Harry was handsome beyond all belief, and sure he was powerful and kind and mature and caring. There she went again. She needed to forget about it all, but that became increasingly hard because now he was knocking on her door.

"Come in" she said, sitting down on the edge of her bed.

Harry entered quickly, wanting to get this out of the way before he changed his mind. As he saw Hermione sitting on the edge of the bed, he nearly lost his breath. She looked so beautiful sitting there, and he wondered where this sudden upsurge of emotion came from. Regathering himself he took a deep breath and began to speak. "About tomorrow I."

"I know, I know." She said angrily. "You won't be coming due to complications blah, blah, blah. Please Harry we need you. The Order, your friends, we all need you. I need you." She added desperately.

Harry was caught by surprise by her sudden outburst, and slumped onto the bed, laying behind where she was sitting. She stood up quickly and moved away from him. "That wasn't what I was going to say at all." He said, sounding deeply bemused.

He looked up at her, his deep green eyes catching her brown ones, causing her to feel dizzy for a moment. "I was going to say I'm coming with you."

Chapter 9

"I ask not for a lighter burden, but for broader shoulders."
-Jewish Proverb

Fred Weasley was just opening the joke shop for the day when two people came shooting out of his fireplace. The first was Hermione Granger, and the second was a black haired young man who he did not recognize.

"Hermione!" Fred proclaimed, nearly knocking her over with a hug. "We were all quite concerned about you, you know, the whole kidnapped by a member of the inner circle thing. George! Hermione's here!" George came running from the back room.

"Sorry for using your fireplace, it's just that Ron and me still aren't connected, and this is the second best place.

"No problem at all!" George said happily. "And who's this handsome young bloke you've brought with you?"

Hermione blushed and turned to Harry, who in turn pulled his bangs back to reveal the lightening bolt scar on his forehead. "It can't be." George gasped. "Harry?"

Harry grinned at them, and they were soon jumping all about in excitement, rambling over one another.

"Dumbledore said he thought it was you."

"Looking bloody good chap, I mean.

"Where've you been all this time."

"Ron will be thrilled."

"Forget Ron, mum will probably have a heart attack with delight!"

This continued for sometime, before Harry interrupted. "Would you guys mind keeping this all hushed up? I only want members of the

order to know I'm back, this has to remain secret." Fred and George nodded, and Harry turned to Hermione. "So, where is this flat of yours?"

Ron awoke groggily. He yawned loudly and rolled over to go back to sleep when he realized that someone was knocking on the door. He got up slowly and made his way to the door in his black boxers with little broomsticks flying all over them, and a plain white T- shirt. He wasn't exactly dressed for answering the door, and it didn't occur to him to put a bathrobe on. As he opened the door yawning loudly, and choked and rubbed his eyes. Hermione was standing there, and next to her was Harry Potter.

"Harry?" He squeaked. Harry had changed, but Ron could recognize those green eyes anywhere, and the scar certainly helped. Harry laughed and entered the flat, closing the door behind him. "What a surprise to spring on a man in the morning. My long missing best mate of 3 years just turns up on the doorstep with my other best friend who was just kidnapped. Nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Breathe there Ron!" Harry quipped, pounding Ron on the back.

"Damn it's good to see you Harry!" The two exchanged a hug, and just stared at each other for a moment, Ron holding him at an arms length and taking it all in, trying to stifle his tears. He turned to Hermione and pulled her into a tight hug. "Speaking of heart attacks, don't you ever get yourself kidnapped again!" The three laughed, and Ron flopped into an arm chair as though exhausted. "Well, let's hear the story then."

It was well into the afternoon before everything was caught up between the trio. Ron suggested going out to a celebratory dinner (his treat) but Harry told Ron that he was avoiding the public, and they settled on making dinner at home instead. Surprisingly Ron had turned out to be a very good cook, and they all pitched in to make a wonderful dinner. Ron kept staring at Harry as though he may disappear at any moment, and Harry noticed that Ron was pinching himself fairly often.

Ron felt as though he was pulling off a fairly convincing act of seeming composed. In reality he felt torn apart with the shock, joy,

confusion, and mixture of smaller emotions he couldn't sort out. Ironically enough Ron felt a great feeling of tragedy swelling in the pit of his stomach, a feeling he had not felt in such a strong amount since Harry first went missing. The feeling generated from the whole notion of all those missed years, the things he and Harry should have shared together and didn't, and the apparent loss of youth. Harry's laughs were a bit hollow, his eyes looked tired and terribly aged and he had a biting silence to him that he had not always had. Ron needed time alone, time to collect himself in silence.

When Harry stood up and asked if it was alright if he retired for the night on the couch, Ron was relieved. He tried to convince Harry to take his bed but Harry was stubborn, and besides, Ron didn't really want to give it up, the couch was far less comfortable. Ron said he'd be going to bed as well, and Hermione agreed that she was also wiped out from the day's excitement.

Ron and Hermione ascended the stairway to their separate bedrooms bidding Harry good night, and Harry pretended to crawl into bed as though making for a night's rest. In reality, Harry knew he couldn't sleep. He had too much to think about, and his pain was unbearable this evening. Memories dredged up from the past, some good some bad. It was the bad ones that kept him from sleeping. Seeing Ron and Hermione reminded him of Sirius, remembering their lost innocence from the childhood they had once met in reminded him of all the lost childhoods he'd witnessed over the years. He remembered being hot on the trail of an American death eater named Harvey Creg and one night finding the aftermath of a murder. Harvey had killed both parents of a family and left the young girl alone to suffer in the world. The memory chilled him and he stood up and walked over to the window to look out. Harry's teacher and mentor who had taught him to use his ancient magic was a woman named Altair Aquilla. She was very silent and impossible to read, but a powerful witch. Harry had been only 17 when he was chasing Harvey, and the heartbreak of the case was the first of a long series he would feel. At 17 he needed support, someone to comfort him and give him strength, but Altair was not the sort and would purposefully overlook his pain. Harry had chosen that path himself, she never forced him to carry on. However, Harry felt he must carry on, and used the notion of keeping others safe in the future to continue going. Especially the thought of

keeping Hermione and the Weasley's safe, because they were the only family he had left. Harry never caught Harvey Creg.

Harry tried to force the memories and the pain away the way his teacher Altair Aquilla had taught him, and he tried to become an emotionless, unmoving being, merely a still lump by the window, nothing more.

It was several hours later when Harry heard footsteps descending the stairs. He considered making a dash for the bed and faking sleeping but changed his mind considering as whoever it was would undoubtedly see him running.

"Thought you'd still be awake." Hermione said from the staircase, watching the sad looking Harry by the window.

"Did you now? Well you do seem to know everything Miss Granger, so I don't put it past you."

"I do know everything Mr. Potter." Hermione joked, joining Harry by the window. "You know, I was just here not that long ago standing with Ron. This seems to be the window where people go to think depressing thoughts."

"Oh yeah, and what was Ron on about?"

"It was both me and Ron actually, and we were thinking about you."

"Me?" Harry asked surprised. Every now and then that insecure 11 year old who'd never known love came popping back out. Hermione just laughed.

"Yes you. Remember, we hadn't seen you for three years and had taken you for d.dea. well it doesn't really matter what we'd taken you for, point is."

"You thought I was dead." Harry stated plainly, unnerving Hermione a bit.

"Actually, I was still in denial. But none of that matters now because you're clearly alive and that's all that matters."

"Well Hermione, I wouldn't say I'm completely alive." He turned his haunted, tired eyes onto her, and a chill ran down her spine. She felt herself go speechless. Perhaps he was right, a part of Harry had forever died. But then she remembered the snow fight. That part of Harry was still there is was just damaged. She decided to tell him this.

"You are fully alive Harry. You just need something to bring out those damaged parts." There was silence as she wondered what exactly had brought out that childlike Harry she had played with in the snow, what had vanquished that lonely look from his eyes and taken that silent edge that cut so deeply from him. What had made him more like that brave, caring and selfless boy she had adored all throughout childhood.

Hermione pondered this, but Harry already knew the answer.

"So, what are you doing out of bed?" Harry asked, changing the subject. Hermione shrugged, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

"Nightmares?" Harry asked not looking at her.

Hermione's eyes widened. "How do you know?"

Harry turned and looked into her eyes. "You've had them every night since I rescued you from the Death Eater's club. Both nights I went into your room and saw you were clearly having nightmares."

Hermione felt surprised that Harry had gone into her room two nights in a row and hadn't said anything until now, but didn't comment on it. "They're horrible nightmares Harry. It's that creepy club I went into. I don't know how you were able to bare it in there for so long. All those death eaters, and Voldemort so close. I hope I never have to go there again."

Harry stepped closer to her and she became acutely aware of the fact that he was only in a muscle shirt and boxers. She felt her stomach flip. "What are the dreams about?" He asked her softly, kneeling in front of her. She suddenly felt very anxious. How did he not notice the effect he had on her? How did he not notice that she was in love with him?

Finally she cleared her throat to speak. "Well, sometimes I never get saved and I'm sent to Voldemort and tortured. Sometimes I find out that you're actually a death eater and you bring me to Voldemort. Sometimes Jaques Farrier beats me until I die."

"Beats you?"

"Well yes, he wasn't exactly the nicest of kidnappers. He was a bit rough and I was afraid he would kill me at first."

"Bastard." Harry said loudly and angrily, causing Hermione to jump.

"Well, it's really okay Harry, I mean, I'm safe now."

"Yeah" Harry muttered sounding unconvinced. He walked over to the window again and leaned hard against the wall. "I shouldn't have left. I was so stupid. I thought by leaving I was protecting people, but I just made it worse didn't I?"

"What are you talking about Harry?"

"Nothing. You should get back to sleep."

"Harry, what didn't you understand about the whole nightmares thing? I don't want to sleep. I can't." Her voice sounded a bit panicky as she said this, and he looked at her with concern.

"You do have to try. Listen, you promise to try, I promise to try."

Hermione raised a skeptical eyebrow. "How will I know that you made any effort?"

Harry feigned a hurt look. "Can't you trust me? No? Okay then, here's the deal. I'll sleep on your bedroom floor. Then we can both watch out for each other."

Hermione considered the proposition. The idea of having Harry sleeping in the same room as her sounded a bit reckless, especially if she was expected to keep her composure around him. At the same time, she liked the idea. She finally nodded consent and the two headed up to her room, Harry grabbing a pillow and blanket off the

couch. Once they settled in her room, they said good night and both emerged themselves in a silence which they hoped would change to sleep.

Harry awoke the next morning on Hermione's bed with her infolded in his arms. He began to panic. What had happened the night before? It was slowly coming back.

He had been laying on the floor in silence trying to sleep when her nightmares began. He could tell they were horribly violent, and he quickly jumped up onto her bed to try to shake her awake. Her eyes fluttered open and he saw intense fear in them, her body trembling all over. She threw herself into his arms and he held her until they both fell asleep.

Harry took in a sharp breathe. He prayed to god she wouldn't wake up as he tried to separate himself from her, despite the fact that he didn't want to. He liked having her close to him as he slept. Once he was separated from her he stood up and quietly left the room to go down to the kitchen and get something to eat. As he closed the door behind him, Hermione slowly opened her eyes.

She had awoken the moment Harry had shifted away from her, and she had remained silent as he moved about. She wished he'd stay with her, it had never felt so good to be held as it had right then. That one innocent gesture from Harry had sparked more emotion than even the deepest kisses she'd ever shared with Ron. She cursed herself severely for having these feelings for Harry, especially since he would probably never reciprocate them. As soon as other witches saw Harry they'd be all over him, and he'd probably forget all about her. Besides the fact that she was unsure of how capable Harry was of feeling after all these years of pain. Anyways, any girl who fell in love with Harry was potentially setting themselves up for heartbreak, for as the prophecy had said, either he or Voldemort was going to die. She didn't want to think about it. She shook her head clear and set to the days tasks.

(I hope everyone liked this chapter alright, things will pick up soon and new character is coming. Also, in upcoming chapters. a lot of darkness, a speech, a criminal and some other fun stuff. If you want

to find out review! Also, as a question to those who do review, this is !IMPORTANT! I know it's early in the game still, but I can't decide weather to end this fic or write a sequel. Please, give me some input. Thank- you.

Chapter 10

"Not all who wander are lost."
-J.R.R Tolkien

When Harry entered the room where the Order of the Phoenix was gathered one might have thought Voldemort himself had just walked in carrying an olive branch. Everyone went pale with shock and the room was dead silent. Harry hated all the attention he'd been receiving, though it was expected, and he tried to appear nonchalant as he came into the room.

Everyone just gaped at him until Dumbledore finally rose, eyes brimmed with tears, and announced "Welcome back Mr. Potter."

The room erupted in cheers and greetings of all sorts. Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing "our savior is here." The moral in the order was higher than ever, everyone, even Snape, had a grin on their faces. Mr. Weasley gave Harry an enthusiastic hug and slap on the back, and Mrs. Weasley nearly killed him with a tackling embrace. Ginny eyed Harry appreciatively from her seat for a while, a fact which only Hermione noticed, and then got up to hug him as well. It took Dumbledore a great deal of effort to calm everyone down, and finally a lull came over the order.

"Now Harry, if you wouldn't mind, could you kindly explain to everyone where you've been the past 3 years?" A small murmur passed across the table as Harry nodded sternly and slowly rose to his feet. Clearing his throat, Harry commenced in speaking. He told everyone of his actions of the past three years and finally sat down to a very sobered audience.

"So, Harry, you say you spied in a death eater's club?" Dumbledore asked. Harry nodded the affirmative, and proceeded to give more detail.

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled with excitement as Harry explained. "Harry, what do you suppose an attack on this club would require?"

Harry did not look surprised by the question at all. "Quite a bit sir. You see, in order to get in in the first place, you need to have a death eater's mark. The only way I got in was by making friends with a high ranking death eaters who could get me in as a friend. Eventually they accepted my presence and let me in by myself. Now, there are a lot of death eaters in the main section of the club, I'd say several hundred. We'd need a small army to get them all. Even if we did, they aren't going to be very helpful when questioned because only members of the inner ring know what's going on, and getting to them is even harder. The room of inner circle members is high security, they let people in by appearance, if they don't recognize you, they don't let you in. I got in because I became one of Jacques Farrier's favorite gambling partners and a friend of his, and he has high influence with the death eaters so he could get me in. But you can't polyjuice your way in, they'll detect it."

Dumbledore bowed his head slightly. "Point taken Mr. Potter." He said quietly. "I wish we had another plan, but this is all we have. By making our way through the club, we may be able to get at Voldemort himself. We will need to research some very ancient magic for, and we will need specialty teams as well as several fighting troops. I have great doubt this will succeed, but it may be our last chance to make a stand."

"Before what?" Remus asked suddenly.

"Before they make a stand against us."

"This is lunacy!" Hermione shouted as soon as they got through the door to her and Ron's flat. "We couldn't do this if we had a year, never mind a month as Dumbledore said!"

"You heard him Hermione!" Ron argued back. "It's the last chance we have, and we're a lot better trying to take the offensive while we can than waiting to have to take the defensive. Besides, who knows how many Muggles You- Know- Who will have killed by then!"

"As true as that may be Ron, think about it this way. This is like a king in chess trying to take the offensive on a full set of opponents."

"Better than waiting until your opponents set has killed your king. At least that way you may be able to take some of their pieces down with you."

Silence filled the kitchen where they stood arguing. They both looked at Harry who had sat down and was now staring off into nothingness. "I'm tired of this war. I just want it over with."

Hermione snorted and yelled back angrily, "Is it this war you want over Harry, or is it your life?"

Silence filled the kitchen once more and Harry looked up at Hermione. "Maybe a bit of both."

Ron coughed loudly. "This conversation is getting a bit too depressing for me. Anyone want a sandwich?"

Neither Harry nor Hermione spoke, they just continued to stare at one another. Hermione then turned and went up the stairs to her room very calmly, saying nothing, Harry and Ron's eyes following her as she went.

Silence. "Well then." Ron said, not really sure what else to say. "Sandwich Harry?"

Harry nodded and turned away from the empty staircase and back to Ron. Ron began to busy himself around the kitchen, and Harry soon stood up to help him. "You know Ron, you really need to see Gryffindor Manor someday soon."

"I know mate, it sounds pretty awesome from what you described yesterday. Does it really have a room just for fencing in it?"

Harry nodded and chuckled a bit. "Sure does, but that's not even the best part. The yard is big enough for a Quidditch field! I plan on putting up the Quidditch posts after this war."

Ron suddenly got serious. "If you live until then."

"Not you too!" Harry said angrily, slamming the knife he was using down.

"Well, Hermione's not the only one thinking about it Harry! Hell, I don't think that there's a single person who in the order who isn't!"

"What does it matter Ron?! Can we just stay off this topic, despite how cheery it might be?!"

Ron just shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich.

Hermione went from angry, to sad, to panicked to angry again. She couldn't seem to get a grip on it all. In only a month potentially everyone could be dead. They were about to try to pull off something so big that she didn't see how it could be done. Harry would probably face Voldemort and his final fate would be determined. She, Ron, and all the other Weasleys, not to mention Remus and her other friends would be in the direct line of danger. She sucked in a deep breathe. This was 100 times worse than their mission against Jacques Farrier, there was no way they would make it out of this one with casualties. She slumped down on her bed when she heard a scratching on the window. She saw an owl there, and she let it in. She quickly unfolded the letter and read:

Dear Ms. Granger-

I request a visit from you at 6:00 this evening at my office. For our upcoming mission I have realized we will need someone whom you are acquainted with to help. I hope to see you then, and you may bring Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter if you wish.

-Albus Dumbledore

Hermione was confused. Who did she know that Dumbledore would want for their mission who he did not already know? She pondered this for a moment when she heard a knock on the door.

"Come in." She said, quickly drying her eyes.

"It's me Hermione" Harry said, slowly opening the door. "About earlier."

"No need to apologize Harry, I just over reacted I guess. It's just. well Harry, can you please promise me that you'll try your hardest to survive this mission, despite what happens?"

Harry stared her straight in the eye, and said, "I promise."

"Good- ah Harry, I just got a note from Dumbledore saying that he wants to see me this evening, and you can come to if you like. He says there's something he needs to discuss with me. Quite confusing actually." She handed the note to Harry and he glanced over it.

"Sure I'll go." He said shortly, and she smiled a bit at him before he helped her to her feet to go have a sandwich.

As they sat downstairs Harry glanced at her for a moment. He felt touched that she cared so much about him. It felt good for him to be cared about after years of loneliness. He recalled that she had always been there for him, she had always cared about him. He remembered how she'd told McGonagal about his Firebolt in case it was jinxed to be dangerous. He remembered how she'd always visited him in the infirmary when he was hurt, how she'd make sure he'd done his homework, and about a million other small things. Here she was, after all these years, still looking out for him. He wanted to think he had done the same for her, but knew he hadn't. He wished he could tell her just how much her care and concern meant to him, but then Ron came bustling into the room.

"Which tie Hermione, the red one or the black one?" He asked holding each up in turn. She stared at him for a moment and then turned to Harry. "I don't know Harry, what do you think?"

"Hmm. definitely the black. It doesn't bring your hair out quite so much."

"Ha ha very funny. I would never have pictured the day when I'd be getting fashion advice from Harry Potter."

"Yep, there's a shocker for you Ron. Where are you going by the way?"

"Oh, I have a date with Cho tonight. I hope you don't mind."

Hermione was staring angrily at Ron. Apparently she was nervous that Harry still had feelings for Cho.

"Mind? No, of course not!" Harry said, trying to emphasize the fact that he wasn't concerned about it at all. "I have plans as it is anyways." He told Ron.

"Oh really? And what exactly are these plans Mr. Potter?" Ron asked, his voice teasing.

"It so happens that I have a date with a beautiful brunette witch and an old man with a long white beard."

Ron doubled over in laughter at this, and Hermione blushed. "Well you have a good time then Harry." Ron said. "You to Hermione." He added with a wink, which she replied to by rolling her eyes.

Harry and Hermione walked the path to Hogwarts from Hogsmede. Hermione leaned against Harry in the cold winter air, her arm linked through his. "Almost there" he announced as they turned the final bend revealing their childhood school. They set up the path to the doors chatting together, and headed for the Headmaster's office.

"Gum drops" Hermione announced as they arrived at the gargoyle. The stairs began to swivel upwards, and they both stepped on. The stairs lurched suddenly and Harry caught Hermione quickly before she fell. When the stairs arrived at their final destination, the two entered Dumbledore's office where they found him chatting with the framed pictures of old Headmasters and Headmistress'.

"Ah, Hermione, Harry, so good to see you both again." He smiled slightly, and indicated for them both to take a seat.

The two sat down and Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Now, Ms. Granger, I have called you here for a very important purpose. Earlier today Mr. Potter said that the death eater's club has heavy security, and you cannot enter without the dark mark. Correct?"

Harry nodded the affirmative. "Then I remembered you saying that you escaped by blasting the wall open. I came to the realization that the only way for us to enter the club is by blasting our way in."

"That kind of eliminates any element of surprise doesn't it?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"On the contrary Mr. Potter. When those death eaters hear a loud bang and troops come out of the dust they won't know what hit them."

Harry nodded slowly. "But you're missing something here. First of all, blasting those walls open will be no small task. It nearly drained me into unconsciousness. Second of all, the streets are patrolled by Muggle and wizard guards. We have to take all of them out, and taking out those Muggle guards will be difficult. We can't use magic against them, or we lose our magic powers. It's an ancient magic principle. Even Voldemort knows that, that's why he's making a Muggle army as well, they can't harm wizards since we can deflect all bullets and weapons they possess out of self protection, but they can slow us down when it comes to hand to hand combat."

"Well there has to be some other way than hand to hand combat!" Hermione intervened. "Otherwise, Voldemort's plan to put all Muggles into prison camps is near impossible!"

"Not when he can use magic to disarm them all and then use Muggle weapons against them." Harry explained. "At any rate Dumbledore, I'm sure you understand the problem here. Too difficult to take out Muggle guards and impossible to blast walls open."

Dumbledore just smiled. "When it comes to the impossible I know of one man who does quite a good job at accomplishing the tasks set before him. He is 25 years old and a Muggle. His name is Raymond "Chrome" Granger."

Hermione stood up quickly knocking over her chair. "Not Chrome. Please tell me you didn't bring me here to talk about Chrome, that pain in the ass bastard!"

Harry was surprised by Hermione's sudden foul language, but Dumbledore just indicated for her to sit down. "Ms. Granger, I understand that Chrome may not be your favorite person, but he is your brother."

"Half brother." Hermione spat back. Oh how she hated Chrome. He was her father's son from his first marriage to an Irish woman who turned out to be a real pain. She managed to get custody over Chrome, and he only came to visit during the summers when she was very little, but his visits ceased because he ended up in reform school at a very young age. His stay was short, he was released for unknown reasons, and his life after that was far more wild from the sounds of it. Right now he was in prison.

Dumbledore took a deep breathe and began to speak. "Ms. Granger, despite your personal distaste for Chrome, he is needed. He has incredible skill with weaponry, and he also has helpful connections."

"Yes, if by connections you mean black markets, gangs and other illegal organizations."

Harry's mouth was half open. He could never have imagined that perfect Hermione could have a brother like this Chrome fellow. Then again, people couldn't help who they were related to, he certainly wouldn't want to think he was any reflection of the Dursleys.

"Those are exactly the sort of connections we need for this Ms. Granger."

Hermione looked extremely irritable. "Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but my dear brother is in prison right now."

"I know." Dumbledore said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

Hermione was now gaping along with Harry. "How do you know so much about my brother?"

Dumbledore took in a long breathe. "As you know, Chrome was in trouble with the law at a very young age. I met him one day when he was about 11 years old. I saw him in front of the Leaky Cauldron (which he could not see of course), and I thought he was a first year heading for Diagon Alley. Later I found out that he had just escaped from his confines, and was on the loose. When I went to stop him to speak to him, he flipped me onto my back on the ground." Dumbledore smiled fondly at the memory. "You see, Chrome is not your average Muggle. His mother was Irish and carried genes from

the Celtic Warrior tribe. It skips about 100 years before it resurfaces, and I was very interested to learn the Chrome is in fact of that blood line. He is super strong, has lightening fast reflexes and the eyes of an eagle. All good warrior qualities."

"Great qualities for a criminal too." Hermione said sarcastically.

"Chrome was going to become a criminal no matter what I did or said. He's money hungry and power hungry. So, instead of stopping him, I gave him things to do."

Hermione yelped at this. "You told him to break the law?"

"I didn't tell him to break the law, it was just generally inferred. It was the tasks I had him do that are the point. They all helped fight dark wizards in one way or another. He became the eyes and ears for Aurors where Muggle crime syndicates are concerned and helped numerous times in dark arts exportations crack downs. All up until a year ago when he got caught with an Irish gang."

Hermione blinked hard. "I can't believe this. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Well Ms. Granger, it was illegal. I can't tell you about everything I do. Now, here's the deal. Ms. Granger, I want you to go to the prison and pick him up. I'm going to pull a few strings and have him released."

Hermione looked as though she had been told she was insane and Hogwarts had all actually been a dream. "Professor. I. I. I protest! We can't just get him released! He's a criminal!"

"Ms. Granger, how many times have you broken school rules for the overall good?"

"That's different! Chrome didn't know he was doing good, he just wanted whatever money he was being offered!"

"Ms. Granger, when's the last time you spoke with your brother? Personally, I don't think he's the terrible man you take him for. He's very talented at what he does, and he did know he was doing good."

He could have gotten more money doing worse crimes, but he trusted me. And I suggest you trust me as well."

Hermione bowed her head slightly.

"Not everyone's as they seem on first glance. Now, this is where you can pick him up tomorrow." Dumbledore handed Hermione a slip of parchment. "If it is okay, I would like to ask you to let him board with you."

"Well, I'm not sure we have enough room, but I guess we can work something out."

Dumbledore smiled warmly at her. "I know I'm asking a lot Ms. Granger, but I have great faith in your abilities. Thank- you."

Hermione kicked the wall hard as soon as they were back in Hogwarts's hallways, which only resulted in her hopping about in pain. "Damnit." She cursed. It was all too much, the upcoming mission, having to deal with her intolerable brother Chrome, having Harry back so suddenly, being recently kidnapped- it was just an overload. Suddenly she felt Harry pulling her close and she buried her face in his chest as she fought back tears. She felt him kiss her on the forehead, and she felt her face turn up to his. And then she did it. She kissed him. She would have expected it to happen in a much more romantic situation, or at least something more dramatic, like the night before the big mission, but not here at such a random time. Hell, she would have at least hoped for it to be in privacy, not a hallway where any unknowing teacher or student could pass. And yet there it was. She was kissing him, and he was kissing her back.

Harry didn't know what had caused Hermione to kiss him, but he sure as hell wouldn't waste the moment. He wanted her to know how much she meant to him, how important she was, how beautiful she was, and- how much he loved her. It was more than just an appreciation of their friendship he felt towards her. He was in love with her. She was the only one who could really make him feel happy, the only one who understood him, and he needed her more than anyone else. He pulled her closer to him and she did not stop him. He finally pulled away to breathe and look her in the eyes.

They stood looking at each other, hearts racing, neither with a word to say. Hermione couldn't bear the pressure the silence posed on them. "I'm sorry." She finally said, and turned away to walk out of the castle.

"No wait Hermione!" Harry called, running after her. He grabbed her arm and spun her around, him kissing her this time.

"What is going on?" She asked leaning against him.

"I don't know, but I don't want it to stop do you?"

She stepped away slightly. "Harry, we need to get back to the flat. We haven't had dinner and." She trailed off as she walked away from him, leaving him standing there utterly confused.

"What did I do wrong?" He wondered, his mind racing at the possibilities. One minute she was kissing him eagerly, the next she was running away. It was all so bewildering. Maybe he still didn't understand girls, maybe she was just like Cho. he couldn't stand that thought. He liked Hermione far too much to deal with finding out that she would treat him just as Cho had, friendly one minute, running off or crying the next. He slowly walked behind her following this train of thought until they got to the flat. It was dark inside, and they stumbled in until Hermione got her wand out and turned on the lights.

Hermione went to the refrigerator and spent a long time just standing there with the door open.

"Looking for something?" Harry asked, breaking the silence and causing her to jump up in the air.

"Oh. ah. what do you want for dinner?"

The atmosphere was so tense Harry could have sworn he would implode from the pressure.

"Um.I'd like to take you out for dinner." He said bravely, afraid she might have some sort of unexpected violent reaction to his words.

Hermione looked as though she was feeling extremely awkward. "Oh well, Harry, about back at the castle, that was a mistake. A mistake with reasons behind it, but never the less, I hadn't meant for that to happen, and it shouldn't have."

"Why shouldn't it have happened?" Harry asked angrily, cutting short her rant. "Don't give me any of that, 'I was just caught up in the moment' or any of that 'We can't ruin our friendship' crap either."

Hermione looked angry now. "You want to honest reason Harry Potter?! The whole damned truth? The truth is that I'm in love with you, and I'm not having you going about toying with that just because you feel like it! How do you like that for a truth?!" She turned away and prepared to storm out of the flat when Harry spoke.

"I like that truth a lot, because it just so happens that I'm in love with you too."

Out of all the responses Harry could have expected, it was not what he'd thought it'd be.

"No you're not."

His jaw dropped wide open. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you aren't in love with me. Maybe you're just saying you are, or maybe you just think you are, but I can tell you that you aren't. It just isn't fathomable."

Harry laughed a little and walked over to her. "You are just too stubborn for your own good, and for a girl who's able to fathom quite a lot, you are being quite shallow." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. "Because, I am in fact very much in love with you."

Ron was having a lovely dinner with Cho, except for the fact that he kept wanting to burst out "Harry's alive! He's not dead Cho, and he's living with me!" He knew he wasn't allowed to though, and so that also ruled out taking her back to his flat after dinner. He supposed they'd just go back to hers instead. He liked her flat better anyhow. It was bigger and more comfortable, and had far less books.

"So what's Hermione up to tonight?" Cho asked innocently as she always did. She was truly concerned about the girl as Ron always had the same response, "At home reading, or studying." She never seemed to get out.

Ron considered his answer for a moment. Cho knew that he and Hermione were part of a resistance group, few others did however. Hermione was a part time student at a medi wizard university, and most thought that that was all she did. Ron worked part time at his brother's joke shop, and that was his cover. Although Cho knew about the resistance group, she didn't know that they were planning the big bust on the death eater's club since that was top secret. Thus he couldn't tell her about Hermione visiting Dumbledore. He also couldn't tell her about Harry being with her. Hence he chose the same thing he always told her, at home reading (studying would sound suspicious since the university was on break for the holidays).

"Poor thing" said Cho. "Doesn't she ever go out? When's the last time she's had a date?"

"Uh. I think it was with me." Ron answered slowly.

"Ron, that was a year ago! She's been all trapped up since then, don't you ever think she gets lonely?"

"Not really" Ron replied honestly. "I think she's fine by herself, besides, she has me as her friend, and sometimes she visits Ginny when she's not in school, and she hangs out with Fred and George, once in a while she even gets back together with her old dorm mates Lavender and Pavarti."

"Yes but what I mean Ron, is maybe she gets lonely from not having a boyfriend. Maybe we should set her up on a date!"

Ron shook his head. "I don't think so. Besides, there's nobody she really likes."

Cho suddenly looked very downcast. "Do you think she liked Harry Ron?"

Ron nearly spit his butter beer all over. "What? Hermione like Harry? Why would you say that?"

"Well, first of all she was always with him and always looking out for him, and he certainly seemed very fond of her. I remember when I went out with Harry for that short period in fifth year, Harry was always on about her. Then after he left, Hermione went out with you, but that never worked out, and since then she's had no one else. No offense Ron, but maybe she's just been yearning for Harry all those years."

That was a thought Ron had never come up with. It had always seemed logical that if anyone of the trio ended up together, it would be him and Hermione, Harry and Hermione as a couple seemed almost as distant a chance as himself and Harry, a thought which he quickly strayed away from for fear of losing his appetite. He then remembered that the two of them were together at the very moment. He wondered if Cho's theory would prove correct.

Cho mistook Ron's silent ponderings for sadness, and suddenly said, "Oh Ron, I'm so sorry for bringing Harry up at the dinner table. That was so stupid of me."

Ron shook his head in disagreement. "No, that's quite alright. Ah, looks like dinner's coming, and just in time! I am starving. Anyhow, I heard a certain seeker in the Pro Quidditch League had an amazing catch just the other day to win the European Quidditch Cup and end the season. I didn't catch the name though."

Cho giggled at Ron's little tease. "Well, the catch wasn't all that spectacular."

"I beg to differ Ms. Chang." He said softly, leaning over the table to kiss her.

After dinner Ron and Cho took a walk in a nearby park, only several other occupants about all being mindful of the blissful peace that was in the beautiful summer night.

"Ron, I've been thinking." Cho began, suddenly breaking the silence.

"Uh oh!" He joked.

"I'm being serious now. I want to ask you to move in with me."

Ron stopped dead in his tracks. "Move in with you? Well, that'll be a big change."

"Yes I know, but Ron. you know I really love you, and I think this could be a great step forward in our relationship. I know you may be nervous about leaving Hermione alone, but it may be good for her in the long run. I want us to be together more often, I don't feel like I see you enough."

Ron stood silent for a moment. Suddenly he said, "When can I move in?"

If someone had told him that at 9:00 PM Harry would be preparing for a date with Hermione Granger he would have told them to get off whatever drugs they were on. He told her he was going to take her to a fancy Muggle restaurant, and now they were both getting ready. Harry flooed back to Gryffindor Manor and found the clothes he wanted to wear and began to clean up. He used a quick spell to trim his hair and put on a bit of concealing makeup to hide his scar in the off chance they saw someone they knew. He had taken a quick shower and wished he had some good smelling cologne to put on, but he'd never needed any in the past. He put on a black blouse and a green tie which many girls had said brought out his eyes, which he hoped was a good thing. A black sports coat went over the blouse and with his black slacks he hoped he wasn't wearing too much black. He picked out his best shoes, got a wad of Muggle money and headed back to Hermione's flat.

When he got there she wasn't quite ready yet and he began to feel extremely anxious as he waited.

Little did he know that she was feeling just as anxious as she got ready. He'd told her what a fancy place it was he was taking her and she ran about trying to throw together a suitable ensemble.

When she finally walked into the kitchen ready to go, she was glad she'd chosen to wear a black dress when she saw that Harry was

outfitted in black as well. She hoped that she helped in making a lovely pair because there was no concern with looks coming from his department. She was quite sure she'd never seen him look so handsome, his green eyes sparkled at her and he looked youthful and healthy.

All he could do was gape at her. He remembered thinking how beautiful she'd looked at the Yule Ball in fifth year, but now she looked even more beautiful to him because she was his and not someone he had to gawk at from a distance. As she drew closer he took her hand in his and said, "You look absolutely outstanding."

She blushed slightly but smiled and said, "So do you. Shall we?"

Together they headed out, first grabbing their jackets. As they passed outside into the cold they immediately became the aim point of everyone's jealousy, a beautiful young couple out on a beautiful young night.

Chapter 11

"Well I've never been part of the game, the life that I live is my own. All I know is that I was born to wander this world all alone."
-Paul Diethelm and Bruce McCabe "Wander this World"

Hermione thought that her date with Harry was everything she could have hoped for. After their evening out they headed back to the flat and kissed each other goodnight.

"No nightmares tonight right?" He whispered to her, brushing a stray piece of hair away from her face. She smiled at him and shook her head, reaching up to kiss him once more. In the back of her mind a small voice screamed, "Don't let this happen! Even if he does love you, he could be dead in a month!" She ignored the irritating voice however and continued to kiss him until at last she stepped back and headed off to bed.

Hermione still had her doubts and worries but was doing her best to ignore them all. Her love for Harry was far more pressing than all of that. She headed downstairs early in the morning to see if he was up. She found him reading the Daily Prophet in the kitchen.

He smiled at her as she walked over, finding it hard to believe that he was so lucky to have her. He put the newspaper down and signaled for her to sit. She gladly obliged, giving him a small kiss.

"Anything in the newspaper this morning?" She asked, picking it up.

"Luckily no." He replied not really thinking about the newspaper but rather spending more time looking at her.

Hermione could feel his eyes on her and she marveled at how everything had changed in one day. She turned to him and kissed him slow and long, reveling in the fact that he was there with her, at least for now, and she would enjoy her time with him the best she could.

They heard a key turn in the door and they broke apart, Hermione heading over to the table to pour herself some coffee.

Ron came through the door whistling loudly and happily. "Good Morning my two very best friends!"

"Good night I take it?" She teased, pouring him some coffee as well.

"Yep, but I'll spare you the details. I do have big news however."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him with curiosity. "Well, do you plan on telling us?"

Ron waved his hand dismissively at her. "In time, in time. For now I'd really like to sit down and drink this coffee which I know Hermione didn't make because it tastes much too good."

"Harry made it, but what are you trying to say Ron? I don't think I'm all that bad of a cook." She sniffed.

"No one's complaining about your cooking, you're just terrible at making coffee."

Harry chuckled with Ron for a little while, but Hermione whapped him upside the head with the newspaper to shut him up.

They all sat down at the table for a while in silence before Ron finally spoke.

"Oh alright, I'll tell you guys the big news." He said, as though they'd been begging.

"I knew he couldn't wait too long." Hermione muttered.

"Wha-?" Ron began "Never mind. The big news is that I'm moving in with Cho. She's been plotting it for quite a while now, and I for one think it's a good idea. She finally asked me last night, and I agreed to start packing and move in today."

"Today?!" Hermione yelped with surprise. "Isn't that rather soon?"

"Well no, it's really easy to pack and move when you can just shrink everything with magic, besides, Cho wants me moved in ASAP, and I want to get it all out of the way before the big mission comes."

"Now did Cho do a lot of crying as she said all this?" Harry asked innocently, earning an elbow in the ribs from Hermione.

"Anyhow, any objections?" Ron asked.

Hermione thought about objecting, in the past she wouldn't have wanted Ron going off to live with Cho and leaving her alone, but when she realized that it would be just her and Harry she quickly changed her mind.

"Nope, that's fine if that's what you want to do." Hermione answered and Ron was beaming.

His face suddenly fell. "The real hard part is going to be convincing my mom on the idea."

There was a moment of silence before Harry and Hermione both broke out in laughter.

"It's not funny! You've never seen her in stellar mom mode, it's like they used to use her for prisoner torture or something. Anyways, will you guys help me pack? Cho's coming over in a little while too, with all of us together we should be able to finish the job by around 2:00."

"Uh, I can help you pack until noon Ron, but then I have to go to the prison to pick up my brother."

"I'm going too." Harry interjected and Hermione gave him a small smile of thanks.

"Hold on. what's going on here?! You don't have a brother Hermione!"

Hermione sighed deeply and began to explain.

"So you mean to say that you're going to have a dangerous criminal living here with you?! Is Dumbledore off his rocker?!" Ron exclaimed when Hermione had finished.

"Yes and yes." Harry responded.

"I don't like the situation at all." Ron muttered.

"He's just a Muggle Ron. Hermione said, "And we can use magic to restrain him if worse comes to worse. Besides, there's two of us here and we'll be fully capable of handling him."

"Except he isn't just a Muggle. He's a Celtic Warrior." Ron interjected.

"All the same." Hermione replied shortly, realizing sadly that with Chrome at the house she and Harry wouldn't have it to themselves.

A knock came on the door. "Damn, that's Cho! Harry, she can't see you, so why don't you go work on packing my room up and we can work on packing my stuff from down here."

Harry nodded and headed upstairs as Ron let Cho in.

As they all greeted in the kitchen Harry set right to work packing. Shrinking charms were so simple that all he had to do was point and think the charm to make it happen. He went about doing that and placing the various objects into a duffle bag he found hanging on the doorknob. He continued until he heard a knock on his door and he slowly opened it up to see Hermione standing there.

"You've gotten a lot of work done already!" She marveled as she stepped in.

"Yep, I'm almost done, what time is it by the way?"

"11:00, we still have an hour until we need to head out to pick up Chrome."

"I can tell you aren't looking forward to picking him up."

"Can you blame me?" She asked, exasperated.

"No, not really, but let's not worry about it too much. We have bigger fish to fry if you know what I mean."

"Yep, bigger fish to fry." She laughed.

He turned to her. "Are you making fun of me Ms. Granger?" He pushed her back against Ron's now bare bed and leaned down onto

her and kissed her so hard she felt completely dizzy and unable to concentrate on anything except being kissed by him.

He flopped beside her breathless and she laughed a bit as she moved to rest her head on his chest. As she lay there she tried to burn the memory into her mind, she never wanted the moment to end.

"Let's finish this packing Harry." She finally said while standing up. He reluctantly got up as well and together they quickly finished the packing. Hermione floated the bag downstairs with a simple "Wingardium Leviosa" and soon she was back upstairs.

"I only just realized we need a car to get to Chrome with! He's a Muggle, he can't apparate, not to mention the fact that we're going into a Muggle area where popping in and out of thin air would be fairly obvious."

Harry, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, appeared to be thinking very hard.

"I have a car, it's actually magic operated, I bought it and paid to have the spells put on it a few years ago. I bought it so that I could go undercover in Muggle areas. The problem is getting it here. A shrinking charm will probably mess up all the magic spells I had put on it."

"Well you must be able to drive it out of Gryffindor Manor if you've taken it out before."

"Yes, that's one of the spells, it can drive over almost any terrain, and trees and other objects move around it of course, so I can drive it straight through the forest. The only thing is that Gryffindor Manor is." He looked at her nervously. He'd never given anyone even the smallest hint as to the location of Gryffindor Manor, but he decided that if he couldn't tell her he couldn't tell anyone. "It's four hours further from the prison than your flat is, it'll take us a while to get there. The car doesn't just pop from location to location like the night bus, and it functions on a normal speed so that it appears normal to Muggles."

"Well, Dumbledore never said when we had to pick him up, he just said it had to be today."

"Alright then." Harry said. "Let's go!"

"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want real danger, I want freedom,
I want goodness. I want sin."
-Aldous Huxley, "Brave New World"

Raymond "Chrome" Granger walked back to his cell from lunch accompanied by a guard. Prisoners in their cells gave him a quick nervous glance and then looked back away. He had a reputation as a real mean man, it was common street knowledge that Chrome Granger was the leader of the Northern Celts, a big time gang. It was also common knowledge that he had some connections with the best street runners anywhere, connections that spanned internationally. He wasn't a man to start something with.

Chrome got into his cell and didn't even bother to turn around as he heard the door lock behind him. Instead he headed straight over to the corner for a work out. He whiled the hours away like that, just doing hundreds of push ups, sit up, pull ups, whatever he could to stay in top shape and keep himself occupied. He didn't know how he'd be able to stand the years he still had coming. The thing he really hated was how he was expected to sleep at night and be up in the morning. He had always been a night person, he didn't care if he slept most of the daylight away, it was the night that he loved. When he was a kid it meant roaming around the small Irish town he'd grown up in with his buddies, and as an adult it meant roaming the city night life with the boys of his gang. He missed parties, pubs, but most of all privacy. He liked being around his buddies, but he also liked solitude and he never got that here. He could never get a moment when he wasn't being watched.

He sighed and flipped onto his back for sit ups. He heard a rapping on the bars of his cell and he angrily moved to see who was there. A guard stood there looking at him.

"What d'you want?" Chrome snapped irritably.

"Now, now, that's no way to be talking to me is it?"

Chrome could feel his temper rising. "Do you have something to say to me or do you just plan on standing there and wasting more of your already wasted life?"

The guard looked like he was getting angry this time, and it was just then that Chrome remembered that it was important to try to be polite if he wanted to be released early for good behavior.

"I do in fact have news for you Granger, but maybe I just won't tell you."

Chrome eyed the guard coldly waiting for him to speak.

"You're being released today."

Chrome brought his eyebrows together in confusion.

"I know, it doesn't make any sense, you still have years to go, but the boss just got the word that you're released. Get a move on, we're not sure when they'll be here."

"Who? Who's coming?"

"Ah, your sister I think." The guard said as he unlocked the cell door.

"My sister? You mean my half sister? What was her name again. Hermione I think." Chrome found the whole thing very odd. He couldn't understand why his sister would be picking him up. They hadn't talked in ages, and he supposed she hated him since he'd caused so much trouble for her father. He hadn't really. He'd caused a few problems on the few summers he'd been to their house, nothing very serious.

It was night time when Hermione and Harry pulled up at the prison.

"Here's the area where we're supposed to pick him up." Hermione said in a tired voice.

"Well, let's do this then." He responded. When he noticed she wasn't moving he reached over and gave her hand a little squeeze. "Come on. It can't be all that bad, and once we've gotten him back home we can go out somewhere."

"And leave him in the house alone?"

"I don't think he's going to steal anything, after all, Dumbledore trusts him."

"Alright, alright. Let's go then." She said reluctantly.

Chrome watched who he presumed to be Hermione climb the stairs to the area where they were scheduled to meet. He only recognized her by the famous Granger brown hair and brown eyes, which he happened to have as well. He saw a tall young man with messy black hair and the build of an athlete climb the stairs beside her. "Probably her boyfriend" he thought, trying to remember if he'd seen prom pictures of the two or something since the boy looked slightly familiar. He saw them walk inside and waited for them to come to him. After several minutes the black haired boy opened the door and the two stepped inside.

"Chrome?" Hermione asked in what sounded like a very uptight voice. She eyed the man who she could barely even remember from childhood. He had a mean look in his eyes, he was the sort of man you could look at and just know they could beat a person an inch of their life without a second thought.

"Yes, that's me. You must be Hermione, and you are." Chrome turned to the stranger and waited for a response. He eyed the man in the corner, slouched back and looking slouched stature adding to the look.

"James Evans" Harry lied, he used that as one of his undercover names, and he wasn't sure if Chrome was trusted to know his real identity.

"Wait. James Evans? I thought you looked familiar."

Hermione looked at Harry in confusion and he shrugged looking equally confused.

"You were on the chase for Harvey Creg one night, same as me. I remember you took five of his henchman out. You probably didn't notice me, I was chasing in a black Porsche a bit behind you."

"You were the one in the black Porsche?" Harry exclaimed. "The black Porsche that shot that one henchman that was on me? You were the shooter?"

"Uh huh." Chrome said lazily. "I figured if you were after Creg also you were somewhat of an ally. I missed catching the bastard though because I had to make that shot."

"You wouldn't have caught him anyways" Harry muttered, personally knowing that Creg had disappeared several seconds after that. "What were you doing chasing him anyways?"

"Two reasons" Chrome said standing up. "For one he killed one of my boys from the Northern Celts, and secondly he had a good bounty on him."

"My brother the bounty hunter." Hermione muttered sarcastically. "As great as this conversation is, think we could get going?"

"Wait." Harry said suddenly. "One last question. How did you know my name is James Evans?"

"I have my connections. She's right, let's get the hell out of here."

They all headed into the car and as soon as they sat down Harry locked the doors and spun around. "You probably have a lot of questions, so just keep quiet while we explain, and then if you have questions you can ask them."

Chrome sat as Harry and Hermione explained how Dumbledore had gotten him out of prison, what he was needed for, explained that they were part of the magic world, and explained that he'd be staying at their flat.

Chrome just nodded when they were done and didn't ask any questions. They started the car up and began to drive off. Chrome sat and let everything set in. This whole mission sounded like suicide to him and he wasn't sure if he wanted any part of it. He'd need to weigh his benefits before he made a decision.

When they all got back it was much later than they'd anticipated. The apartment looked slightly bare without Ron's stuff but they weren't all that concerned at the moment. Hermione flopped down into an arm chair and Harry sat on the arm, both of them too tired to think. Chrome on the other hand had plenty of energy, after all, he was a man of the night and he'd been getting way too much sleep for his own liking for the past year spent in prison.

"I need to talk to Dumbledore tomorrow." Chrome said suddenly breaking the silence.

"Good idea." Hermione said waking up a bit more. "Tomorrow the order has a meeting, I suppose it would be alright if you attended since you'll be doing work for the mission."

"I won't just be doing work for the mission if I agree." Chrome thought. "I'll basically be agreeing to sacrifice my life." He stayed silent however. Finally he said, "where will I be sleeping?"

Hermione looked at Harry. "Uh, I'll take the couch and Chrome can have Ron's old room."

"Where's that?" Chrome asked, feeling slightly frustrated.

"Upstairs and to the left. The flat is magically enhanced to have two floors. Your room will be across from Hermione's." Harry answered.

"What? No way, I'm not letting you take the couch. I don't need everyone to know when I get up at night."

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances and Harry just shrugged. "Well in that case I'm heading off to bed for the night."

As they headed up the stairs, Chrome leaned back against the wall. This next month could be one of the most interesting of his life.

((Once more I hope you liked the chapter. I know it was mostly based around an original character, but don't worry because he isn't that important. He mostly represents a symbol I wanted in my fic, but he isn't the main focus. Anyhow, next chapter: Harry, Hermione and a late night storm and more about the mission!))

CHAPTER 12

"It is not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are."

-Roy Disney

Hermione woke up to the sound of thunder. Once she was awake she quickly realized there was no falling back asleep and she walked over to the window to watch the show of brilliant blue lightning filling the black sky and rain pelting down. Since the time she was a little girl she had always liked to watch a good storm. She looked over at the clock to see that it was 1:00 AM. She wondered if Harry was awake and she decided to go find out. She walked over to his door and knocked quietly.

"Come in" she heard, and she opened the door to see Harry sitting by the window watching the storm. He smiled at her and waved her over to the window with him. She went willingly and soon she was leaning back against him watching the storm. After 20 minutes she began to feel cold standing by the window and shivered a bit. Harry chuckled and rubbed her arms to keep her warm and she soon found it irresistible to turn around and kiss him. The kiss was short and appreciative and then they found themselves just standing there staring into one another's eyes.

"Chrome didn't seem so bad, not to mention the fact that he did in fact save my life that time he shot that man who was on my tail." Harry said breaking the silence.

Hermione sighed and walked over to Harry's bed which was Ron's just the day before. She flopped down on it and watched Harry at the window. He was a picture of darkness, the shadows of the room covering one half of his face, the lightening from outside showing the other half in an eerie blue light. "Well, you don't know that he saved your life, but the fact that he did take the time to kill your attacker is extraordinarily good for him."

"Well, compared to Dudley, Chrome's a walk in the park." Harry said sitting on the foot of the bed.

"No, you see, the difference between Chrome and Dudley is that Dudley was a spoilt bully. Chrome is tough and smart unfortunately. When he was a kid he didn't get in trouble for school fights and vandalism like Dudley probably did. He was already running errands for gangs, and was a member by age 11. He's always known who to make connections with, how to impress them, and then how to use them. In the long run, he's worse than Dudley. Gangs of buddies who beat up little kids is not the same as gangs of criminals who kill."

"Point taken!" Harry said in an exasperated voice, flopping on his back beside her. He turned his head to the side to watch her. She didn't seem to notice him looking so he took the opportunity to observe her features. She was so beautiful; he loved how every feature of her, from her bushy brown hair to her brown eyes. He loved the way she could express so many emotions to him just with her eyes. He had only met back up with her several days and their relationship had only developed into something new the previous night, and yet he could read every expression that flickered past those warm brown eyes. He could see when she was sad, scared, or frustrated, but he preferred to see when she was happy, excited, curious or his favorite look, when she was in love with him. He had only gotten the chance to see that look for a little over 24 hours now, and he prayed to whatever deity that may be listening that it wouldn't end in a month. He wanted to live, he wanted to defeat Voldemort and thereby end that overbearing stress he had grown up with, and then he wanted to live the rest of his life with Hermione. He had only been truly aware that he was in love with her for a bit over a day, and yet he couldn't imagine not being with her now. He knew what the lonely life was like, and he never wanted to go back to it, he wanted and needed her to be by his side, to watch out and care for him as she always had.

At this point Hermione realized that Harry was watching her and she felt her stomach do a little flip. She couldn't believe that he was in love with her. It wasn't as though she'd thought herself ugly or felt she had a repulsive manner about her. It was more like she had never imagined that someone she admired as much as Harry could have the same feelings for her as she had for him. He was everything to her, her rock (as clichéd as that may be), her best friend, her most trusted person, he was the love of her life and she didn't want to

imagine a world where she couldn't watch him as he sat by the window brooding into the night, just as she had a moment ago. True, he could be sinister, but he could also be loving, and he did always have a tendency of playing hero, but that came from his good will, and fact of the matter was that he was a hero.

Hermione turned onto her side to get closer to him and he wrapped his arm around her, allowing her to relax against him.

As usual Chrome had not slept much that night, and thus it was good that Harry and Hermione let him be all the next morning. Hermione did not come wake him until noon while Harry was back at Gryffindor Manor getting some of his things for the day. She came into the living room and saw that her brother was sleeping on his stomach with the blankets all tangled about him. "Chrome?" She said from the doorway, and when no response came she walked closer. "Chrome!" She said louder, and he shifted a bit, and then quickly flipped onto his back as though he was about to be attacked.

Seeing that it was just Hermione he mumbled sleepily, "What time is it?"

"Noon." She said in a displeased tone. "I just came to see if you wanted some lunch."

Chrome noted the dislike in her voice and he wondered how he could possibly make it along in the house if she hated him so much. "Lunch sounds good." He finally got out, and she left quickly to go to the kitchen.

Eventually he followed her in, first dressing so he wasn't just in his boxers. "So. how's your parents?" He asked as he got into the kitchen.

"You mean how's dad?" She shot back.

"Sure" he replied shortly.

"Why should you care? You never write or visit."

"And that would bother you why? You don't seem as though you exactly like my visiting."

"I don't." She agreed, placing a sandwich in front of him.

He ran his fingers across his short cut hair in frustration. "So much for making polite conversation" he thought, though he wasn't really all that perturbed, it was just that it would make living at the flat a bit easier if she wasn't jumping down his throat every chance she got.

He cleared his throat and tried a more relevant question. "What time is the meeting with the order tonight?"

"6:00" she said shortly turning to leave the room.

"Oh yeah, and I have a few dead bodies to bring back here later tonight. I shot them up last night with some of my big bad jail buddies." He added nonchalantly, just for the sake of getting a rise out of her.

She spun around sharply. "Oh, and I suppose you think that's hilarious. You know something, I don't like you and you don't like me, and you've had enough chances to drive my family insane without bothering me more. In a month this whole mission could be a failure, and thus I'd like to spend the remainder of the time until then enjoying being alive."

"You don't like me? Really? There's a news flash!" He said sarcastically.

"And this is exactly why. You are so self centered, you don't care about your family, you don't care about anyone else but yourself. When you were a kid you wiped my father out with your little antics, half of my childhood he looked as though he were on the verge of a nervous breakdown because of you. But you don't care. You're a self obsessed cheat, liar, thief and probably murderer. Again, I don't like you and you don't like me, so let's just let it drop." She left the room in a hurry and Chrome slowly leaned back in his chair.

"I never said I didn't like you."

When Harry came back from the store he couldn't find Chrome or Hermione anywhere. He searched the kitchen and living room and finally headed up to her bedroom. Hearing her inside and knocked on the door. "Hermione, it's me, Harry."

"Oh, come in." She said. He opened the door to see her cleaning up around her room in a rather violent manner.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"Chrome, that's what's wrong. Ugh, I don't know why I let him get to me! He doesn't even do anything, he doesn't have to do anything, its the mere fact that he's here that drives me insane."

"That doesn't seem like you Hermione." Harry said, confused. "I'd always taken you to be more forgiving than this."

"I know, but it's just so hard for me to get over a childhood of hating him. And it's not like he's ever even bothered me directly. When he visited our house as a child he basically ignored me, which was fine because I was afraid of him, but he made everything so hard on my parents. Maybe I should just try harder, but I don't really want to like him. He's not the type of person who deserves to be liked."

"Well, you don't have to like him." Harry said slowly. "We just need him to do this thing for us, I mean, I don't like Snape but I can get along with him when I must. It's the same thing here."

"You're right I suppose." Hermione said, calming down a bit.

"Of course I'm right! I'm Harry Potter, world hero, Quidditch phenomenon, savior of all those he knows, and boy who lived!" He joked.

"Big headed boy who lived!" Hermione teased back and it kept up until she had her room straightened out and they found something other than cleaning to do to preoccupy themselves for a while.

At 5:30 Harry and Hermione came inside from a walk to find Chrome playing with his lighter. Chrome had gotten some of his artifacts back

from the prison, but he had left a lot of his stuff with his number one man, Rex Carlet, a member of the Northern Celts gang.

"It's time to go" Harry told Chrome. Chrome quickly got up and put his lighter in his pocket. He followed them out the door and they all headed for Hogwarts. Chrome had only seen the school once before and he smiled a bit as they walked up to the impressive castle. The scenery reminded him of a castle near his home in Ireland, and how he missed that home. He missed the smell, the people, the way the night felt, the mist of a new morning, everything that was home to him. Most people thought that a rough and dangerous man such as himself wouldn't care for such things, but few really knew Chrome. He was the best street fighter and also a gang leader, but he was also human and there were many things about life that money, power and violence could not get him. One of these was family.

They finally arrived in the meeting room where nearly everyone was already gathered. They took three of the remaining four seats as it seemed that Ron had not arrived yet either.

"Told you we should have picked Ron up" Hermione hissed in Harry's ear.

Dumbledore rose to his feet and introduced the order to Chrome. He began to speak again when Ron suddenly burst through the door.

"Sorry I'm late!" He gasped and quickly sat next to Harry.

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled a bit and he nodded at Ron. "As I was about to say, today I think it would be prudent if we began to organize our attack squads. I have placed people into the following positions" at this point he passed out sheets of parchment with the following:

- Wizard Fighting Squad Leaders: North: Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks East: Arthur Weasley and Severus Snape South: Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley West: Bill Weasley and Charlie Weasley

- Muggle Fighting Squad Leader: Raymond Granger

- Spells Unit Leader: Molly Weasley and Minerva McGonagal

-Special Task Force: Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter, Mad Eye Moody, Altair Aquilla, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Everyone eyed over the arrangements until Dumbledore recalled their attention. "The only one written on this list who is not a member of the order is independent agent Altair Aquilla who is very powerful and indeed necessary for this operation. We will need all members to participate in one way or another, though many of you may be working in a squad under a leader. Each fighting squad except for the Special Task Force will need at least 25 people working under them. We can only supply 5 aurors to each group, they're keepers of the peace, not soldiers. The Spells Unit will be supplied with additional workers from the ministry, and are free to lay claim to any other people order members here and now who are not yet attached to another position. Molly? Minerva? Any requests?"

McGonagal slowly swept the table with her eyes. "Yes, we will need Olympus and Fleur."

"And Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley added hastily.

Everyone at the table, except Chrome perhaps, knew that Mrs. Weasley didn't just want Ginny for her skill with spells, she wanted to keep at least one of her children out of the direct line of fighting, however, not even Ginny protested, for no one could blame the poor mother. It wasn't as though being on the Spells Squad was extremely safe though. They would be expected to go right onto the "battle grounds" and take down any and all barrier spells and curses.

Dumbledore nodded in agreement and then continued, "Very well then. Our first line of action must be to recruit 20 additional members to your teams. We will meet 2 days from now and go over those lists of recruits, and then we will begin to perfect our plan of attack. Agreed?"

There was a murmur of agreement throughout the room and Dumbledore signaled for them all to depart.

"What a cheery thing we have going on here!" Ron said sarcastically, slowly rising to his feet. "Recruit 20 people who you want to sentence

to death basically. In that case Hermione, I say we recruit Draco Malfoy!"

"I agree!" Fred said, sneaking up behind them, George trailing him. "You know what we all need George?"

"A party?" George asked feigning innocence.

"Why, what an idea brother!" Fred said back. "And what d'you know, we happen to have invitations right here!" He handed Hermione, Harry and Ron flyers to their party which was addressed to take place at their Hogsmade home and dated for right after the next order meeting.

"We're facing the biggest and most impossible mission of our lives and all you can think about is throwing a party?!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Of course Hermione, it's Fred and George!" Ron answered as though it were obvious. Together they all headed for the door, but Chrome hung back. He quickly stopped Harry before he left.

"Listen, uh, James, I need to talk to Dumbledore. I'll get back to the flat later." Chrome said hurriedly.

Harry just nodded and left to join Ron, Ginny and Hermione out in the hallway.

"Why'd he call you James?" Ginny asked, confused.

"Oh, well, I told him my name was James Evans, it's one of my undercover names. I'm not sure if he's to be trusted yet."

Hermione looked ready to say something but bit her tongue and Ginny just nodded to show that she understood what Harry was saying.

"What do you say we head back to the flat for a few butter beers?" Harry suggested and everyone nodded eagerly in agreement.

"It is good to see you again Chrome. How are you?" Albus Dumbledore said cheerfully as the young, fit, brown eyed, brown haired boy approached.

"I've been better, I just got out of prison which was a real blast, my half sister who I'm stuck living with hates me, and you're asking me to do the impossible. You're calling for more explosives than I've ever dealt with, all which I have to arrange through a network of black marketers I haven't spoken with in over a year! Not to mention the fact that I'll be putting my boys in the line of suicide. Now, they're good fighters, the best, but this is crazy. It'll be night, the enemy will have the advantage, and they'll probably be well armed." Chrome slumped back on a chair and put his feet on the table. "Where's the profit?"

Dumbledore stared sharply at him with his piercing blue eyes. "If you cannot see the profit in this then I have taught you nothing." He said plainly. "Not all things appear in the form of money. First of all, this war will effect you eventually, I am sure it is already cutting into the day to day activities of your gang members. Secondly, there is something great to be won here."

"Oh yeah? And what is that?" Chrome asked angrily, restraining himself from lashing out at the cryptic old maniac.

"Your family Chrome. I remember quite distinctly that when you were a child you told me if you could wish for one thing it would be to have someone close who cared."

"I never said that."

"Not in so many words, no. But when I asked you what you most wanted, you did in fact tell me that you wanted your mom to stop running off from you and to be free of the law so you could be back with your friends. Are you disagreeing that you are lonely?" Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at the young man.

"HA! Lonely?! Why would I be lonely?! I have a gang of boys who would just as soon put a round of bullets in a man than abandon me! My best man, Rex Carlet is like a brother."

"I know all that, I know all that." Dumbledore said, gently raising his hands to hush the angry boy. "However, you have not spoken to your mother in ten years, and for good reason. But your father and sister. they never did anything to you and yet you haven't spoken to them in even longer until recent. You commit to no relationships, and in fact rarely have them, why is that?"

Chrome stood up, furious. "Oh what, onto my love life now are we? I don't need your psycho analysis bull shit old man, you need me, but I'm out. I don't need this!" He prepared to storm off when a large hole suddenly appeared in front of him.

"Just wait one moment more, please Chrome." Dumbledore said gently.

"Doesn't look like I have a choice does it?!" Chrome spat back, gazing down into the black hole in the floor which had just been conjured before him.

"I have given you two good reasons to join this mission. You have until the next meeting to decide, but please do not be so brash with your actions. That is all."

With that the hole disappeared just as quickly as it had first come before him, and Chrome was on his way.

Harry, Ron and Hermione sat at the dining room table at their flat and were working out who to recruit for Hermione and Ron's fighting squad as Chrome played with the silverware. He was casually throwing the forks and knives into a make shift dart board. He still had not decided what he was going to do and the meeting was coming up the next day. He wanted to just forget what the old lunatic had said and return to the Northern Celts where they would undoubtedly celebrate his return with a real Irish party. Yet, he couldn't get himself to do it. He didn't know what was wrong. All that shit the old fraud had told him was sentimental trash thought up by overly sentimental writers. Besides, he was supposed to be tough and without conscience. He had killed many times before and had not felt guilt, yet now he could not leave these people off to suffer their own fate. He rubbed absently at his tattoos which spanned his muscled arms, trying to figure out what was wrong with him.

In the meantime, Harry, Ron and Hermione had composed the following list of recruits:

Viktor Krum (who agreed to join their squad without any persuasion), Cho Chang (who joined with some persuasion towards Ron), Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom, Michael Corner, Fred and George Weasley (it had been determined that Bill and Charlie's squad would take Percy so there'd be three brothers to each Weasley squad), Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, Lee Jordan, Rubeus Hagrid, Mundugus Fletcher, Justin Finch-Fletchly, Colin Creevy (who had actually turned out to be a pretty good dueler), Denis Creevy (they were on last pickings), Oliver Wood, Luna Lovegood, Padma Patil, and Pavarti Patil (the two made a good team).

Much of the team was assembled from members of the DA, and others were old friends. Some were just good witches or wizards who were loyal. and the last un-recruited members left.

"Well, there's our team." Ron said finally. "Glad that's over. Speaking of over, are either of you two going over to Fred and George's party when the Order meeting is over tomorrow?"

Hermione glanced over at Harry who responded, "Well, if I cover my scar and put on my contacts. It just needs to be set straight that everyone calls me James. Understood?"

Everyone nodded, peaking over at Chrome to see that he hadn't heard. Feeling secure that he was in his own world of whipping sharp objects across the room they all emerged themselves in a more casual conversation, which continued on late into the night.

Chrome eventually stopped his monotonous activity, and sat down on the couch, away from everyone else. He leaned forward and placed his head in his hands. With the faint glow of the street lights as his only illumination, he looked like a truly desperate man. Hunched over, darkness surrounding, his face buried in his hands as though in disgrace. He remembered once hearing a quote that read something along the lines of "it's not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are. But what exactly were his values? That was what he had to determine, and he had until tomorrow night to do so.

Nobody seemed to notice Chrome leaving the room, it was like he was just a shadow moving about. He seemed to prefer it that way too, and something seemed to be bothering him suddenly. What it was that plagued him they had all silently agreed to leave alone. He'd figure it out for himself. They had troubling thoughts of their own. So many young lives had been recruited, and many would probably be lost. They had such a clear view of the horrors that lay before them, perhaps too clear of a view. They pretended to be more interested in Fred and George's upcoming party, but in reality they were far more concerned with the mission, but too afraid to talk about it. Yet it continued to creep up on them, an inevitable darkness that lurked closer and closer by the minute.

"We will not go quietly into the night...we will not vanish without a fight! We're going to live on! We're going to survive! Today, we celebrate

our independence day!"
-Independence Day

Harry had awoken groggily in the morning only to find he had an owl waiting for him. He didn't even bother to get out of bed, instead reaching over and taking the letter by stretching his arm out. Tiredly he ripped it open to find that Dumbledore was calling a noon meeting amongst the members of the Special Task Force.

Harry sighed with an exhaustion that should never be felt by someone so young. He knew what the special task force was, as did everyone in the order, but no one had dared utter its intent until now. The special task force was hand picked wizards and witches whose sole purpose in this mission was to take out Voldemort or die trying. He slowly rose out of bed and stretched before throwing on a pair of pants over his boxers and pulling a wrinkled shirt on over his head. He headed for the bathroom and soaked under the hot water for a long time, preparing for what promised to be a very trying day.

So it was that Hermione had from noon until 6:00 when the order meeting would take place to herself. She planned to hit the books hard, the silence and freedom from distractions would allow her to concentrate on researching new spells for her and Ron to teach their attack squad. She had the clear intent of setting out her books, parchment and quills and not moving until 5:30. However, she had forgotten one crucial fact; she wasn't alone.

Just as she got started Chrome wandered his way into the study where she was working. "Chrome!" she said with exasperation, "I need this study time! Do you want something?"

Chrome gazed at her for a long period of time, making her grow uncomfortable. She went to ask him again if he wanted something, but he suddenly began to speak.

"I have a choice to make." He said firmly. "I have had thousands, or millions of choices to make in my life time, but I can't make this one."

He suddenly looked shy, something that seemed so utterly uncharacteristic of the quiet but concieted man, who always looked as though he were on the edge. His conversation seemed to quickly change topic. "What does that paper say on your wall?" He looked a bit closer and read, "Not all who wander are lost."

"It was written by the famous novelist J.R.R Tolkien, he wrote." Hermione began to explain, but Chrome cut her off.

"I'm not as stupid as I seem. I know who he is. The quote is good in theory, but it may lead people to forget that some who wander, are in fact lost."

Hermione had suddenly become intrigued. She had no idea where he was going with this, but when he put it in an academic field, her specialty, she felt the conversation spring to life. "Perhaps we are actually related" she mused to herself. Finally she asked, "What are you trying to say Chrome? That you're lost? That someone else is lost?"

Chrome smirked bit, showing slight traces of that cocky, "I'm better than the law" attitude that made her want to punch him in the face. He responded, "Maybe I'm lost. I just don't know what to do." His voice had a tinge of nearly disguised despair, but Hermione heard it none the less. He continued, "Why should I suffer the same fate as you all? I see it in your eyes, the fear, the doubt. Many will die, that is the one sure thing in this mission. I should leave you all to die, but I can't and I don't know why." His voice suddenly sounded angry. "Give me one good reason why I should care to help protect a group of people who mean nothing to me?!"

Hermione blinked. She found it hard to believe what she was hearing. He looked dangerous, his anger bringing back that malicious glint that sometimes flickered there. She finally found her voice, and said softly, gently, "Perhaps there is still some human left in you Chrome. Maybe, even after every crime you've committed, every sorrow you've suffered, you still have compassion."

Chrome stared off at the wall. A long silence lapsed. "I will do what it is Dumbledore asks of me, though I do not know why. I will lay my life

down for a cause I do not understand." He stood, and left without as much as another word.

Hermione felt pity for him for the first time in her life. It was not the same sort of sorrow she felt for Harry, who had been damaged severely by the world, and who had been harnessed with a burden too heavy for even one hundred men. This pity came from the realization that Chrome was ignorant in a world where he seemed to have seen and to know more than he should. He was ignorant on how to be feeling, because he had never had compassion aimed towards himself. Hermione had feared the same would become of Harry, but he was pulling through, because he had the love and compassion of so many. Chrome did not, and he struggled to understand it all. Yet he agreed to march into what could potentially be his ruin, and saddest of all, if he died, would anyone care? He had no family to truly grieve his death, for in their mind he was already dead. His gang members would probably move on, though of that she could not know. They would probably miss him, but there are no tears for the rugged criminal.

The Order meeting had made unpredictable progress. A system for training for the upcoming events had been organized, and now the order would meet twice a week for personal training, and the individual squads would meet several times a week so that the new recruits could be trained. The system was well organized but had required much debate and controversy.

By the time Hermione, Harry and Chrome arrived back at the flat, they felt deeply burdened, and Harry and Hermione hoped to shed that burden at the twin's party. Chrome on the other hand, had different plans. He needed to call Rex Carlet to get him to pick him up so he could reclaim the rest of his possessions and get to work on his part of the deal. He didn't expect to see either of them until the next Order of the Phoenix meeting. He headed off and Harry and Hermione went to their separate rooms to get cleaned up.

Harry, going as "James" hoped the night would be care free, and that he'd have a chance to see old friends without revealing his identity. He wanted to forget about all of the troubles facing them and relax. Have a few drinks with Ron, steal a couple moments with Hermione

and see who had changed since the years he'd been missing. He pulled on a clean black tee shirt, loose fitting jeans and placed his contacts on. He doubted any one who didn't already know would recognize him, and covered the scar as a last step in concealing his identity. It was understood that everyone would be allowed to know him, as James Evans, as long as they said he was a member of the Order, since everyone at the party already knew about the Order of the Phoenix, just not about Harry.

Once Harry was sure his identity was concealed, he stepped out into the hallway to see Hermione coming out of her room as well. She was dressed nicely and had tamed her bushy hair. She looked beautiful as always to him, and he smiled at the sight of her, his concerns slipping away into oblivion.

Hermione smiled back at him, seeing how handsome he looked and how well the shirt he was wearing did justice to his well defined muscles. Suddenly she frowned a bit, realizing that other girls at the party would notice this as well, and undoubtedly be all over him.

Harry noticed the slight frown, and as they made their way outside, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Oh nothing, a stupid passing thought." She answered quickly, ashamed that she had let such a jealous thing bother her.

"Oh really? I didn't think you ever had stupid passing thoughts, only brilliant ones."

"Ha ha, oh you are hilarious, picking on my intelligence. Jealous?" She teased.

"Of course not, I have you on hand to do all the intelligent thinking, so why should I be jealous of that?" He joked back, taking in her lovely smile. That troubled him for a moment. Would other guys notice that too?

Hermione noticed his change in attitude, and she questioned him this time, however, unlike her, he answered.

"I'm just worried that I may not be the only guy who notices how beautiful you are." He admitted.

Hermione laughed a bit, "Oh Harry, you hardly need to worry. Even if that does happen, I'll just brush him off; there isn't a single man I would choose over you."

Harry beamed at this and nodded contently. Hermione on the other hand was not so pleased because now she was back on the thought of other girls hitting on Harry, and she told him so.

He stopped her in the middle of the path and pulled her close to him, kissing her so hard her head spun. "How's that for insurance?" He finally said, breathless.

"Hmm. I think I need some more." She said, but he just shook his finger at her playfully and continued off down the road, leaving her frustrated.

He could already feel his burden growing lighter and he managed to push the Order, Voldemort, and any other terrible thoughts to the back of his head for the time being. He knew they would submerge later, and he would again be seized by despair, but for now he could just focus on the night, crisp and young in the frigid December air.

When they arrived at the party they were quickly separated, Ron dragging Harry one way to meet with their old dorm mates, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan and Neville Longbottom. Hermione was taken the other way by Ginny who was talking excitedly about how her last year at Hogwarts was finally over and what plans she had for afterwards.

Ginny led Hermione to the dining room of Fred and George's house, where the music wasn't quite so loud and the crowd had clearly narrowed down to just a group of girls, amongst who were Lavender Brown, Pavarti and Padma Patil, and Cho Chang. Hermione took a seat at the table and Ginny went over to get them all some drinks. The other girls chatted, but Hermione paid them no attention. Instead her attentions were distracted by an odd picture framed on the wall. When Ginny returned, Hermione took the opportunity to inquire about it.

"Oh that?" Ginny said with a laugh, pointing to the picture that looked as though it was of some sort of odd metal contraption, engraved with intricate designs. "Fred and George don't even know what it's of. They've taken up a stupid hobby of going to auctions and surprising the other bidders by winning with all the money the Weasley Wizard Wheezes is making them. They just got that to show off because some man at the auction wanted it very badly and was apparently being 'snobby in bidding' as they put it. So, they decided to win it for themselves but it has no purpose to them."

Hermione found the whole situation very odd, but didn't push Ginny for further details, for at that moment Pavarti entered to room and asked loudly, "who's the drop dead gorgeous man I just saw?" Everyone gave her an odd look, and she continued, "Black hair? Green eyes?"

Ginny laughed a little and explained, "That's James Evans. He works for the Order."

"The real question is, is he single?" Pavarti asked, obviously impatient for answers.

"No!" Hermione blurted out, causing Ginny to give her an odd look. "He's with me." She added a bit sheepishly.

Cho seemed very pleased by the fact that Hermione was dating again, and the other girls (except Pavarti, who looked a bit downtrodden) were excited and took turns running out to see what he looked like. Ginny however, who knew that James Evans was in fact Harry Potter, looked as though she were in shock.

"Hermione and Harry?" Ginny mused, trying to put two and two together. "There's a couple I never would have expected. Yet Harry's so different.. So changed. I wonder why they didn't tell us until now."

Of course, it didn't even take the time for Ginny to think those exact thoughts before the news had spread all about the party that the two were dating, and everyone in the Order who knew Harry's real identity was thinking similar thoughts.

After the excitement settled down the girls strayed away from the conversation, spent a brief time on Quidditch, then clothes, and finally Lavender managed to steer it back to where she wanted it. boys.

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes as Lavender blabbed on and on about how wonderful Seamus was, and what she had bought to give him for Christmas, and a thousand stupid other things.

A nasty little voice in the back of Hermione's head was saying, "So what if you bought him a new sweater Lavender? The mission kicks off the day after Christmas, so he'll probably never get the chance to wear it." She quickly stifled those depressing thoughts and tried to rejoin the conversation.

Harry had come to realize that joining up with a crowd of people again after so many years was harder than he'd thought. He found a dark corner to sit in by himself, and he watched the crowd of people.

"In a month they could all be dead." He thought to himself, looking at every young and happy face. Suddenly, images of the past rushed over him, memories of death and pain. He found himself placing the face of every person who passed him onto the many dead bodies he had seen. The picture was becoming gruesome, and unable to stop he closed his eyes. He had thought he was more or less healed, that being with Hermione had erased all that pain, but he began to realize it would never completely leave him.

Ginny was getting onto the topic of how she couldn't wait until she finished at Hogwarts and hoped she could convince her mother to let her move in with Dean Thomas since Ron had been aloud to move in with Cho. Suddenly, Pavarti sighed loudly and exclaimed, "Am I the only single one here?"

Everyone laughed a bit, and Cho tried to comfort her saying, "oh don't worry Pavarti, there's plenty of great single guys out there looking for someone just like you. For example there's." Cho trailed off trying to think of someone when Ginny came to her rescue, blurting out, "Chrome Granger!"

Hermione gaped at her, and everyone else, not knowing who Chrome was gave her curious looks.

"Don't give me that look Hermione, just because he's your brother doesn't mean he isn't gorgeous." Ginny said, trying to defend herself.

"You have a brother Hermione?" Lavender questioned, her gossipy side getting the best of her.

Hermione was growing very frustrated. "Yes, I do, but he's a criminal and a keeps to himself type person. Honestly Ginny, what sort of suggestion is that?!"

"It wasn't a suggestion, it was only an example!" Ginny said, exasperated. "He is single right? Plus, he is very handsome."

"Really?" Pavarti squealed, clearly missing the part where he was a criminal.

As Ginny proceeded to describe him, Hermione got up and left. So far the conversation had covered every male she was in close acquaintance to except Ron, and she expected the conversation would turn there soon as well. At that point she could expect Ginny to leave the room also.

As Hermione traveled through the house, the music got louder and louder as she got closer to its source. As she entered the area where most of the people were congregated, she noticed that Ron, a bit drunk, had stood up of a table to make an announcement.

People quieted down a bit, and the music was shut off. Hearing the halt in noise, the other girls came into the room to investigate. Cho made a motion to get Ron down from the table, but Hermione and Ginny stopped her, both curious to hear what Ron had to say.

Ron swayed on the table a bit, and regained his balance. His face went from a goofy grin to suddenly very serious, almost too serious for Ron. His arms were slightly held out to keep his balance, and the blue party torches the twins had lit gave his face an eerie expression. The scene reminded Hermione of when the night she had watched Harry sitting by the window, lightening lighting up his expressions. Such a blend of black and blue created the darkest of images, and Hermione was almost a bit frightened.

Finally Ron spoke, and all the years of hardship came out in his voice. The pains that were never reflected in his young freckled face came out through the sound of his voice. All the fear he had felt at eleven, on a dangerous conquest for the Sorcerer's Stone, the horror he had experienced upon hearing that Ginny had been taken into the Chamber of Secrets, the betrayed feeling of knowing his pet rat had actually been a betrayer of his best friends parents, and the feelings of loneliness at his best friend's suspected death. Thousands more pains and fears made his voice sound cracked and old, and yet he spoke.

"I have never been good with words, though I may seem to talk a lot. Yet, I stand here, and look at my friends, my family, my love, and I know I need to say something. Something in the face of this oncoming darkness must be spoken and while I should not be the one to say the words, I find myself standing on this table speaking." Ron took in a deep breathe and many thought he might collapse with drunkenness, yet none made a move to stop him. Ron was just drunk enough to speak the thoughts of all, so they let him continue. "Soon we will train so that we may march into our potential deaths. I'm fed up to the ears with old men dreaming up wars for young men to die in ((A/N: George McGovern's quote)). Yet, we shall not pass into the face of this war without a sound, because this is our chance to make a stand. This is our war, our chance to become heroes. So we will face the day with bravery, and face this night with all recklessness, as though it is our last day on earth. Party like tomorrow is the day we die, because tomorrow we will begin to go silently into training. Let our voices be heard tonight!"

As Ron's speech had continued, he had captivated the crowd so that it was silent as a graveyard. Never would anyone have expected Ron to speak such words, everyone delivered with more intensity than the last, a slur of heart felt emotions that had been pulled out by liquor, but once exposed left not an eye dry. So it was that at the end, a cheer went up from every person, even Harry, who had stood quiet and valiant in the corner. The music resumed and they danced, drank and laughed like it was their last day on earth to enjoy themselves. They would not go quietly into the night.

Chapter 14

"Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is mystery. And today? Today is a gift.

That's why we call it the present."

-Babatunde Olatunji

The days passed quickly, too quickly. The day before the mission had arrived at a bullet fast speed, and despite how hard everyone had tried to cling to the minutes. Training had been hard and brutal, and Hermione had found that Harry was often required to leave for days at a time. She knew he was going to have to go after Voldemort, but she'd always known that day would in the future, and now that day was only 24 hours off.

It was Christmas day, a day of innocence and a day when all students were on vacation. Hermione remembered Christmas' with Harry and Ron at Hogwarts, and those at home with her parents. Usually she awoke with a gleeful start, feeling that anything was possible on Christmas day. Today however, she rolled over reluctantly to find she was sleeping in Harry's arms, and remember that she was sleeping in a Hogwarts dormitory. All of the rooms empty of students were used for lodging the members of the mission, which numbered close to 100.

Harry awoke slowly to find Hermione staring directly into his eyes. A painful twist knotted in his stomach as he thought about losing her, about how life with be if he survived and she did not. He couldn't bear it, for now that he had her, life without was simply unimaginable. He kissed her softly on the lips and she snuggled up closer to him.

"Are you scared Harry?" She asked, her voice muffled against him.

"Yes." He answered simply.

"So am I." She breathed, her voice spilling with emotion and fear.

He held her close, running his fingers down her back in a soft soothing manner. He had never cared so much for anyone in his life, had never known so much love, and he wanted to hide away with her,

out of danger, without a care for the rest of the world. He thought back to his school days, back to before he knew he loved her. He was quite sure he'd loved her even then. He'd trusted her with all his life, but she had also cared for her so greatly that he would lay his life down for her. It had been thoughts of her and Ron that allowed him to save himself from dementors in fifth year, and it would be those same thoughts that could save him now.

"Harry do you remember your promise? That you'll try your hardest to survive?"

Harry nodded saying, "It still stands and there isn't a single thing that could stop me from trying to return to you."

Hermione seemed to relax and time lapsed in silence.

All over the castle a sad silence seemed to cover every hallway, every room, every square inch of the grounds. Birds did not sing, owls did not fly about for exercise, and snow began to fall from the gloomy grey skies.

In a tall tower an old man with a long white beard spoke not a word, and thought to himself, "oh what has the world come to?"

In a dungeon room a greasy black haired professor paced about and cursed the wretched world and all it had done to him.

A tall red haired boy pulled a black haired girl close as they waited for his family to come and celebrate Christmas.

In a hallway not far off, a red haired girl was being comforted by a long time boyfriend, who whispered that all would be okay.

Two parents who had lived enough years to see their youngest child near the end of her Hogwarts days embraced, shedding their tears in private so that their 7 children would not have to seem them look weak. The woman cried for the thoughts brought to her by the boggart, that all who she knew and loved would die.

A young Irish man wondered what he would do on this Christmas, a holiday he rarely found occasion to celebrate, but now saw as

possibly his last full day on earth. He prepared to pick up the rest of his gang, a group who trusted him and would die for that, those who remained only to be memory charmed into thinking it had all just been a gang fight.

One twin looked at the other and wondered if any magic could separate them from each other and the eternal friendship they had forged.

Throughout the castle such thoughts remained, and they suffered in what were truly the darkest hours.

"Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up."

-James Baldwin

By noon the Weasley family and all their closest friends including Harry, Hermione, Cho, Dean, Remus, and even Dumbledore, had gathered in the Gryffindor common room to celebrate Christmas, despite the downcast tone. When presents began to be exchanged, the mood lightened considerably. Everyone called Harry his real name openly because it had been determined several days previously that all involved in the mission had a right to know his true identity, which naturally came as quite a shock. Charlie and Bill passed out the presents from under a Christmas tree which had been dragged in by Hagrid on Christmas Eve. Today Christmas was celebrated regardless of religion, in more of a loving way than a religious way.

Presents went round about, Harry and Hermione gave a subscription to Quidditch weekly and a set of Chudley Cannons robes to Ron. George and Fred gave Hermione the picture she'd inquired about on the wall of their house, saying she could have it since she seemed interested and they had no need for it despite its outrageous cost. Ron, Cho, and the rest of the Weasleys gave Harry a black dragon skin trench coat which was designed to repel most spells. It was clearly an expensive jacket and had been found being sold at a strange and remote dragon store by Charlie. They all agreed he most needed it, and the girls secretly agreed he also looked very good in it.

Presents continued to go around and nobody noticed when the door opened and Chrome entered the room.

Chrome had a box under one arm and quietly made his way across the room taking in the happy, loving atmosphere of the room. He had never seen a family celebrate Christmas as his mother never bothered and he was never his father's family for that part of the year. He made his way over to Hermione and stopped in front of her.

"Happy Christmas," he said, sounding unsure. She looked up from where she had previously trained her eyes, and gasped when she saw him.

He had a very bad black eye which was cut and bleeding just beneath the bottom part of his eye lid, and his cheek was scraped and bleeding lightly. His injuries had become more and more common as they neared the mission and his work to obtain the right explosives and weaponry had gotten tougher. Hermione knew he had been in some bad situations in the past month and done some very illegal things, but she no longer blamed him as she used to. Instead she quickly healed his injuries and finally responded, "Happy Christmas."

He held the box out before him somewhat awkwardly and she looked up at him with confusion.

"It's for you." He explained.

She took it from him and opened it. Inside was a small revolver with ammunition.

"It's an easy enough gun to fire," Chrome said. "It's mostly a matter of knowing what to do. Its small size should make it pretty easy to wield. It'll shoot up to 50 feet, and holds multiple shots in case you miss. I just thought you might need it. just in case. I know you have magic but you can't use that except to disarm Muggle attackers, and say that doesn't work. Plus, they'll set off a physical attack if you disarm them, and if you can't fight them magically, you had better shoot them the Muggle way as you call it."

Hermione wasn't so sure she had it in her to shoot a gun, but he had a very good point, and was surprised that he'd thought to give it to her.

"I can show you how to use it, or you could learn from James. I mean Harry how to use it. He's trained to shoot a gun, at least that's what he told me."

"He is," Hermione agreed, "but since it's from you maybe you should show me."

Chrome looked pleased by this and set to giving her instructions. When they finished, Hermione told him she'd gotten him a gift as well, and handed him an envelope. She wasn't originally sure whether or not to get him something, and decided he deserved a gift for all the work he'd been going through. Now she was glad she had.

He opened the envelope, and first time since he was six, he got a present that wasn't money from his dad. He took out a gift certificate to a magic tattoo shop in Hogsmede. "Painless and any design imaginable" it read, and was signed:

TO: Raymond Granger FROM: Hermione

He smiled at his real name being written, a name he would only allow family to call him if he had any. Now, after 21 years, he finally did.

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return."

-Moulin Rouge

Harry and Hermione had agreed to trade presents later that night together, and so it was that after every member of the mission had met for a big Christmas dinner, they found themselves outside starting a fire to keep them warm by the lakeside. It had stopped snowing and the sky was so clear that every star looked a brilliant white. Harry leaned back onto their blanket, and Hermione leaned against him.

Hermione took a small wrapped box out of her pocket and handed it to Harry. He unwrapped it and opened the box to find a pendant

necklace of a gold lion. "His eyes glow red when danger's near by." Hermione told him.

"It's perfect." Harry whispered, glad the eyes were not glowing at the moment. "This is exactly the sort of thing I need. You know me too well."

"Everyone knows you always in danger Harry."

"Yes, but not everyone knows I live at Gryffindor Manor, and the lion is my second greatest symbol only next to my lightening bolt scar."

Hermione laughed a bit at this, and pulled herself closer to him for warmth. Feeling this, he wrapped his arms around her until she felt completely warm and secure. Silence came about them again, and Hermione went of into another world of thoughts until she suddenly realized a gold wrapped package was laying in Harry's out stretched hand before her. Slowly she took it from him and unwrapped it, not saying a word. Inside was a gold ring. It had a beautiful emerald stone on it, and it reminded her of his eyes. Around the band was an engraving in Latin. Hermione did not need to ask Harry what it said since she had studied Latin in order to better understand what different spells meant. It read, "De corde totaliter Et ex mente tota, Sum presentialiter."

"With all my heart and all my soul I am with you." She read, a tear trickling down her cheek.

"Now and forever." He whispered, and she hoped the memory would never leave her. She gazed off into the stars and let it burn into her mind, so that she would always be able to recall it.

((REVIEW! Even if you only say one word, I'd just like to know how many people are reading this. I hope you liked this chapter, the next chapter should be pretty long and the mission will start. Also, you'll get to meet Harry's mentor!))

Chapter 15

"We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

-Sir Winston Churchill

Harry and Hermione did not fall asleep until past midnight, and yet Harry found himself waking up at 2:30 in the morning. He awoke with a feeling of dread bringing pain to his stomach. He decided to set about doing what needed to be done before he met with the special tasks force at 7:30. They would spend the whole day making final preparations for that evening when they would attack.

Slowly slipping out of the hold Hermione had around him, he made his way to the shower and let the hot water wake him up and refresh him. He felt it scald his skin and give him a feeling being new and fresh. He lathered his black hair clean and silky and when he got out of the shower and decided a haircut and a shave were in order. After he was feeling well enough cleaned he wrapped a towel around himself and headed to his suitcase where he had his clothes for the day packed. He took out a black cotton shirt and pair of loose black pants, both which were easy to move in and would be inconspicuous in the dark. He pulled on a pair of combat boots which his mentor had bought for him as a parting gift. He hadn't seen his mentor at any of the special task group meetings yet and he would be seeing her later that day, something he was glad for. He tried to recreate a mental image of his trainer, Altair Aquilla, and so he thought back to the day he had first met her.

Dumbledore had said Harry could meet up with the so called "contact" at the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. Now he waited in the warm summer breeze, trying to stay hidden from the odd assortment of people who were making up the traffic between the two places. Old hags, wizards in long black cloaks, treacherous looking goblins, and even one man who came up to Diagon Alley

wiping blood from his lips. The man had short, spiky black hair and a pale complexion. For a moment Harry thought the man's eyes were red, but couldn't tell in the darkness.

"I wonder if that man is a vampire." Harry thought to himself, trying to recall everything he'd ever learned about the undead. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted when he felt a firm grip seize his shoulder.

He spun around and saw a woman who looked to be roughly 5 foot 10 standing behind him. She looked young except that her eyes looked too knowledgeable to belong to a young person. Her hair was straight and black except for two braided strands alongside her head which were a silver color. Her eyes were a dull green, looking both wise and emotionless. She may have been thought beautiful except that she looked too stern and serious to be any object of lust. Her black robes barely shifted in the breeze because despite the warmth of the summer, she wore a very heavy fabric.

They observed one another in silence and Harry grew puzzled as to how she had snuck up behind him without his noticing. Later he would learn it was just one of her many tricks.

"Follow me." She told him in a commanding voice, and he did what was demanded of him without hesitation. They walked down a silent alley and opened a side door. Harry followed her through, and as soon as he'd crossed the threshold, he felt a tug as though he'd just touched a port key. When the world around him refocused he saw that he was in a dark cave. He saw that woman was still walking and he continued to follow. They went deeper down into the cave until finally they arrived at a dimly lit staircase carved into stone. Harry followed the woman up the stairs to a set of great doors which when opened revealed the breathtaking inside of a mansion.

Harry would later discover that the mansion was the House of the Heavens, an underground mansion where the Sorcerers of the Stars lived. Altair Aguilla was one of those sorcerers and thus was able to wield the power of the stars, an ancient form of magic that only 23 could possess. Harry would later meet all the Sorcerers of the Stars, amongst who was Alpheratz Andromeda, who was overly romantic, Aldebaran Taurus, who was very old, wise and powerful, and his

favorite, Spica Virgo, who had a love for nature. Of course, each Sorcerer's first name was the major star in the constellation represented by their last name and Harry came to learn much about mythology and astronomy. He also came to learn that each one of their personalities reflected that of their constellation, this was the same for Altair Aquilla, named for the Eagle constellation. She was faithful, and devoted to everything she did, but also emotionless and cunning. Harry quickly came to understand her character, and at times he still found himself missing the House of the Heavens.

Harry snapped away from his memories and headed off to his other case where he found his wand, the trench coat the Weasley family and Cho had all chipped in to buy him for Christmas, and a .45 caliber pistol. He placed the gun in a holster on his belt and reached for the final item, the sword of Godric Gryffindor. He had a special sheath for the sword he had found in Gryffindor Mansion, and he slid the sword into it and fastened it on his back. Feeling as prepared as he probably ever would be, he walked over to the bed, kissed Hermione gently on the forehead, and left.

Though it was 2:30 in the morning, Harry was not the only one up. After settling his boys out early in the afternoon, Chrome had the rest of the evening to himself. He took the opportunity to smoke and drink his way into a false sense of security and now he blared his music thru a boom box Hermione had enchanted to work despite magical interference.

Chrome sat at the window seat looking at the lovely Hogwarts grounds and wondering what it was like to grow up in such a majestic environment. He had the window slightly opened so the cold air brushed against him in a cruel, unforgiving way. He did not care though, feeling pleasantly numb to the world. Soon he knew he would feel every pain as he became not Chrome Granger the Muggle, but Chrome Granger the Celtic Warrior.

Chrome pondered what precisely it meant to be a Celtic Warrior. It gave him strength that had become legend to the street folk, and also such fast reflexes that he could knock a gun from a man's hand and have him around the neck before the poor sucker could say "ouch." It also meant he had the mind of a warrior, fierce, cunning, and with out

guilt or remorse. He knew that when a person looked him in the eye they saw a maliciousness that frightened them, and he loved that power. Despite all this, his being an abnormality was not outwardly obvious, and sometimes even forgettable.

In the 1st millennium BC, the Celts had dominated much of Western and Central Europe. The Celts were split into three classes, Druids (who were priests), warrior nobles, and commoners. The nobles fought on foot with swords and spears, and many were fierce and powerful warriors. From these, one was born long ago into the blood line of Chrome's mother. He had been a high noble and powerful soldier, blessed with every Celtic warrior quality that made them so feared. Even Dumbledore was not sure if were magic or genetic or something else that had led to the strength, speed and stealth of the so called "Celtic Warrior" but every 100 years the legendary power resurfaced in someone of that bloodline, and it had done so for Chrome.

Tomorrow that ancient blood would set back into battle, perhaps for the last time.

Ron didn't wake up until 3:30, which was still plenty early. He pulled his messy red head out from under the pillow, and wiped his bleary eyes clean. Slowly he stood and stretched with a loud yawn. He stumbled to the bathroom where he splashed cold water onto his face. Once back in his bedroom he decided he wasn't going back to sleep and decided to wander the hallways for a while, get a good look at Hogwarts for the first time since he'd left.

Ron pulled a white T-shirt on over his head and left his pajama pants on, unable to think of a good reason as to why he needed to change. He grabbed a maroon Weasley sweater on his way out, knowing how cold the corridors could be.

Heading down the hallway he heard someone coming and squinted in the dark to see who it was. Harry was walking briskly down the corridor, already dressed for the day, and looking completely prepared to go.

"Hey there Harry" Ron called out, catching Harry's attention.

"Hey Ron" Harry said, looking a bit awkward.

"Where are you off to this early?" Ron asked, gesturing to Harry's equipment.

"Ah, just getting ready for the day. I figure I'll go over the plan as I take a stroll, and then later I'll have to meet up with the Special Tasks Force."

"Right then." Ron said, shuffling his feet.

Harry nodded, a distant look in his eye. He made a motion to continue moving forward, but Ron put his arm out.

"Wait Harry, if I don't see you again, take care. Come back."

Harry stared into Ron's eyes, and Ron could feel a sort of coldness he thought had vanished from Harry coming back. However, Harry just nodded again, and said, "I will. And you Ron, you'll be fine. You're the only brother I've got."

Ron smiled a bit, a sad smile which did not meet his eyes. They shook hands and embraced in a brotherly hug.

"See you later." They both said, and were on their separate ways.

Hermione woke up at 5:30 and was glad when she realized she wasn't meeting with Ron to assemble their squad for another three hours. She immediately realized that Harry had already left, and part of her was glad for it. She didn't need any teary farewells, she needed to focus.

She got showered and dressed for the day, and then decided to try to preoccupy her mind with a book. She was pleased to find that the book was successfully preoccupying her, and soon it was 7:30. She knew that somewhere in the castle, Harry was with Albus Dumbledore, Mad Eye Moody, Altair Aquilla, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. They would all be preparing to launch an attempt to take out Voldemort.

When it came down to it that was what this whole war was about, Voldemort, the power craving lunatic who sucked life and happiness from the world. Harry was an example of this. He had once been a kind, regular sort of boy, happy for the first time upon discovering a whole new world lie out there for him. Voldemort had taken away that happiness and over the years turned Harry from his kind ways to becoming a cold and dark person who had only just awoken and was still struggling. Hermione hated Voldemort with every inch of her being, and hoped the Special Tasks Force accomplished its mission and they could put their fear and hate behind them.

That very group was assembling at that moment, up in Dumbledore's office. Harry had been the first to arrive, and he sat in silence with the head master as the rest entered. Kingsley Shacklebolt who had been selected for his strength and stealth as a wizard came shortly after Harry, and Mad Eye Moody entered precisely on time, not early, not late.

The last one to arrive, and the only one who had made none of the previous meetings, was Altair Aquilla. She swept in wearing her long black robes and looking every bit a death eater, rather than an ally. Dumbledore broke out of his staring trance when she entered the room, and he smiled at her.

"Thank goodness you've arrived." He said to her with a smile, and she smiled back at him, for the first time Harry had ever seen his mentor smile.

"I would never let down a dear old friend." She responded. "Even if he does refuse to join the House of the Heavens."

Harry felt confused. Dear old friend? Altair looked to be no older than 30 years of age. Furthermore, why would Dumbledore be joining the House of the Heavens?

"As lamentable as the loss of Regulus Leo may be, my time here on Earth is not yet finished and I cannot leave until I have served those around me." Dumbledore explained to Altair.

Harry finally spoke up, puzzled. "Regulus Leo died? Of what?" He asked, remembering the middle aged man, face and build of a warrior.

"He did not die of disease, old age or any mortal ailments because he is immortal." Altair said, looking at her old student, proud of how he had changed and grown more powerful. "He could die of a powerful spell, but this time, such was not the case. No, Regulus Leo merely vanished, and now we need a new person to join the House of the Heavens and become the new Regulus Leo."

"Immortal? You aren't immortal are you Altair?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"I am, my mortal form died 500 years ago, and I have lived in the House of the Heavens since. Although, I do not remember my mortal life anymore."

"You see Harry," Dumbledore intervened, "those who are Sorcerers of the Stars lose their memory when they are accepted into the House of the Heavens. Their mortal soul dies and their immortal soul is discharged of the burdens of the past and laid down with new burdens: to uphold their position in the House of the Heavens and whatever calls to duty that may include."

"But you aren't dead, so why do they want you?" Harry asked confused.

"I am very old Harry, and the Sorcerers of the Stars know that I am knowledgeable enough in ancient magic to join them, for that is what it takes, a large amount of knowledge in ancient magic, and a character matching that of your constellation. The Sorcerers want me to let go of my hold on the mortal world and join their haven. Of course, I cannot do that yet."

Harry nodded, well knowing all was lost if Dumbledore died. There was still one thing he didn't understand though. "Why don't the other Sorcerers of the stars join us in the war against Voldemort? If they are powerful in ancient magic, and can only be defeated by a strong spell, we could easily win with them."

"Ah Harry, that is a very good question, but with a very good answer. The Sorcerers of the Stars have tasks set out before them, they do not choose their paths in the immortal life, but rather follow the will of the stars. That could mean both for good and for evil. It has been this way since the ancient magic was created, and will remain that way. It

was just so lucky that it happened to be Altair Aquilla's path to train you and join us on this mission. Speaking of the mission, we have gotten off track. Let us recap."

As Dumbledore commenced in speaking, Altair took a seat next to her student whom she had taught so much about ancient magic. If there was an empty space in the House of the Heavens when Harry died, and he matched the character of the position, he would surely be taken in. Until that time he was still mortal, and she sensed something in him that hadn't been there when they'd split ways. He had finally reached a level of emotional control that she was very pleased with, but she suddenly sensed that he had developed a feeling of love. He had softened, and this greatly concerned her. Her task had been to aid him in his destiny of facing Voldemort, though that had not specified whether he win or lose, she did not want mortal emotion interfering with that training when the fight came.

She pondered this for a moment, and then refocused on the task at hand.

"So you think you could tell heaven from hell, blue skies from pain."
-Pink Floyd

The hour was approaching at last. Every squad had been prepared, all the Order except for Harry wore their robes, Harry being in his black. The auror squads were added onto the recruits, and the army of close to 100 looked as good as any army. Unfortunately, looks could be deceiving, for fear tore at every soul.

Chrome sat up at the head table of Hogwarts' great hall, his feet up on the table and looking every bit of disrespectful he truly was. Hermione came up and sat next to him, Ron following shortly after. They all sat in silence, and the rest of the squad leaders soon joined them.

The tables were filled with the different people involved with the mission, old mixed with young, Muggles with wizards, and all houses sitting together. The port keys were handed out and they began to vanish. Chrome laughed as his the members of his gang's eyes flew open in astonishment.

As every group left, Dumbledore and Chrome descended to the group of Northern Celt gang men, all of them looking cruel, tough, and perfectly fit for the task at hand. They had plenty of illegal firearms, and several of them carried large silver cases. Inside were extremely powerful bombs which they would detonate to blow away the walls of the death eater club in order for the fighting squads to enter.

Chrome nodded at Dumbledore, and they all apparated away. They arrived in a dark alleyway as the plan was. The other groups were located in various sections of the wizarding city, all waiting to advance to their part of the attack. Dumbledore apparated away once Chrome and his squad were situated and Chrome set into action. He had spent almost the entire past month preparing his plan for action. He had had to attack other gangs, rob a few places, and take out a few people who were getting in the way, but everything was all set.

He would take a group for fire cover as four separate groups went to each side of the building and detonated the explosives. Meanwhile, the wizarding squads would begin moving in to take out all magical guards, and head through their newly blasted doorways into the club.

Chrome sighed. He spun his gun quickly in his hand, gripped it tightly and pulled back the hammer. "Let's go boys."

"I believe it is our fate to be here. It is our destiny. I believe that this night holds for each and every one of us, the very meaning of our lives. This is a war and we are soldiers. What if tomorrow that war could

be over? Isn't that worth fighting for? Isn't that worth dying for?"
-Matrix Reloaded Trailer

A sudden fury of gun shots filled Ron's ears. "There's our cue!" Ron whispered furiously to Hermione.

Hermione nodded and waved her hand to their 25 person team which was hidden in the back of the alley. They all came rushing forward in a false bravado. Hermione could feel their fear. Most of them were still just kids like her, and the explosion of gun shots was causing their hearts to race in terror. For many, the sound of a gun was

something they were completely unaccustomed to, being raised in wizard families.

As the squad raced forward, Ron and Hermione took the lead, brandishing their wands and running in time with their racing hearts.

A sudden explosion hit the side of a building and cast rubble over the group. Dennis Creevy took a piece to the side of the head and was instantly knocked out.

"Didn't take long before we lost him." Ron thought sarcastically dodging for cover. The squad scattered, and soon seven wizarding death eater guards came into the alley, and spells began to fly.

"STUPIFY!" Ron yelled, sending one death eater to the ground, watching Hermione out of the corner of his eye as she took two down in one blast. It take long before the guards were eliminated, and Ron was transporting them to a holding cell with a port key. Many port keys had been made for the occasion, and they also used one to send Dennis Creevy to the medical wing where Madame Pomfrey had enlisted a few of her very best students to help.

Hermione regrouped the squad and they pressed forward. What the poor squad was unaware of was that the Dark Lord knew their every motion out on the streets. They soon found out however when they were encircled by a group of death eaters who had been alerted to the situation.

Hermione felt her heart pound as the sound of Viktor Krum screaming under a torture spell filled her ears. She cast her gaze up to the night sky, so familiar looking, the stars starrng down on her. The same stars she had spent just the previous night looking upon with Harry. How much the world had changed in under 24 hours. The stars had looked so beautiful from the comfort of Harry's arms, but now they looked harsh, their cold whiteness bleary against the black night. She watched curses of all colors zip back and forth between ground and sky, and suddenly felt herself pulled to the ground as a curse zipped over head. Ron rolled off of her, hissing in her ear, "we need a plan and fast! Think!"

Hermione tried to focus her mind as she watched Micheal Corner take an avada kedavra to the chest. "Thinking is my strong point." She told herself. "Now think!"

"Send sparks up in the air Ron! Call the other squad's attention to us. Let's try to get our squad to one side of the alley and set up some temporary shielding spells. They won't last long, but it may be enough time."

Ron nodded, just realizing how tightly he was gripping his wand. Hermione ran about, bent over to avoid curses and rounding up the squad members. Ron sent a stream of yellow sparks into the sky, hoping someone was in a position to come to their aid.

The shield spell was set up though their numbers had dwindled from 25 to 20. Now all they could do was wait.

The Special Task Force was moving swiftly and efficiently. Harry walked in long silent strides along side his mentor. When a death eater guard came they were quickly shot down, and they had encountered none of the difficulties Hermione and Ron's squad had come across. Once they got word from Chrome via firework they would escort the Spells Unit into the death eater club. Hopefully, by the time they got there, much of the death eaters would have been removed and they could get the Spells Unit straight to work taking down all curses and magical barriers.

As they made their way down the zigzagging alleys, they saw yellow sparks go up.

"That's from the South side of the club!" Harry said, panic in his voice, well knowing that it was Hermione and Ron's side.

All Dumbledore had to say was, "Do not fret Mr. Potter, we will head there right away."

Altair on the other hand, looked far more disturbed by Harry's panicky tone. "What has become of my student?" She thought. "Where once he could kill and wield incredible ancient magic now he has regained mortal emotion. He cannot win."

It did not take long for the Special Task Force to realize that Hermione and Ron's Squad had been surrounded. Dumbledore sent Kingsley and Mad Eye to the roof of one building, Harry to the roof of the other, and planned for himself and Altair to close in of either end of the alley. They all split and Harry went as fast as he could to the building, climbing the ladder on the side up to the top.

On the roof Harry saw that there were five death eaters sending spells down into the alley, trying to penetrate the shield spell that Harry could just barely make out in the dark. They did not see the tall dark man climb up behind them, and did not notice as he put out his arm and murmured the words of an ancient spell that caused no sound that could be heard by the human ear, but shook the ground with a tremor. From Harry's hand a forceful blast was issued, one in which sent three of the five death eaters hurtling in an explosion of rock and dust.

The other two death eaters whipped around to see the man standing there, his black jacket caught in the breeze and flapping about him, making him look more menacing than ever. He held no wand, but a faint smoke rose from his out stretched hand.

One of the death eaters began to yell the words to the killing curse as the other sent a stupefy flying at Harry. Harry turned his back to the simple stupefy, and the dragon skin jacket easily repelled it. Before the other attacker could finish the killing curse, Harry waved a hand at him, sending the man flying off the building.

Turning back to the final attacker, he watched as the man's eyes grew wide. Never had he witnessed such wordless and powerful magic. He sent the killing curse flying at Harry, and Harry hit the ground to dodge it.

The man smiled in his triumph, and prepared to finish Harry, who was defenselessly lying on his back. As he raised his wand however, the Harry's hand shot out and he yelled, "expelliarmus!" Before the his attacker could complete the killing curse. Defenseless, the man charged him with his bare fists, but Harry was quickly to his feet. A punch across the face had the attacker out cold.

Harry stood over the passed out man and snapped his wand in half, throwing the pieces on the passed out body. He shook his head and performed the killing curse.

Hermione smiled as she saw that the firing from the roof tops had ceased. She knew help had come. She pointed this out to Ron, and he grinned his goofy trademark grin.

"About bloody time!" He laughed, since it hadn't taken at all long.

Suddenly screams went up as three bodies came crashing down from the building top, along with a lot of rubble. Then again as another body came flying down from the same direction.

Hermione tensed up, and Ron gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "I'm sure those were death eaters and not our guys." He tried to assure her, but no one could tell in the dark.

Ron cast a nervous look down towards Cho who looked quite shaken. He wanted to go to her, but knew he could not. They had agreed to stay separate during the mission so that one would not threaten the other's life if they got into extreme danger. Neither wanted the other taking the killing curse or any other curse for them. Ron breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that Fred and George were with her and they were settling her down.

The shield gave out and everyone jumped to their feet. "Form a circle!" Ron yelled, and they all did as told. "This way no one's back is to oncoming attackers." Ron told Hermione, who just nodded.

No spells were being fired on them, and for that they were glad, but they still waited to see what would happen. Silence came over the alley. They all stood around feeling a bit on edge. Gunfire still sounded in the distance. Every now and then they could see spells from faraway streak through the night sky.

Ron began to think about his Dad's squad. It was mostly comprised of old friends, around the same age as Arthur Weasley. Ministry workers like Amos Digory, but also old Slytherins who Arthur's partner Snape had selected. Not all Slytherins were bad was what Ron's dad told him, but Ron didn't believe it.

His thoughts then shifted to Charlie and Bill's squad. Percy was there, and though Ron had never been fond of the snobby, big headed nuisance, they had made amends, and he wanted him to stay alive and well. He hoped Charlie's dragon trainer friends were up to par and that Bill's friends from the bank would also be able to the job. He looked off into the direction he knew they would be, but saw no spells flying. He couldn't decide whether that was good or bad.

He started remembering Bill and Charlie teaching him to fly, when several of the windows of the buildings exploded. Apparently the death eaters had found a way to get to them.

The shards of glass hit a few of their number, and they fell back a bit.

"DON'T FALL BACK!" Ron yelled, trying to get the group from becoming disorderly.

He felt his heart racing as death eaters poured into the alleyway. "There must be 20 of them." Ron thought, and he suddenly felt dizzy. His attempt at bravery was failing, for at heart he was still truly a little boy, the tall red headed friend who was quick with wise cracks and had a fast temper. Spells flashed all around him, but he held his ground as he always had on missions, with or without Harry.

People were falling as Dumbledore came from his end of the alley. He sent a series of powerful blasts into the masses, and could soon see he'd been joined by Altair Aquilla on the other side. Mad Eye and Kingsley came running up beside him, and they were making little progress into the chaos.

In the center of all the commotion stood Hermione who was trying to keep her attackers at bay. She saw Ron go down and her heart froze. She tried to concentrate, but instead kept thinking, "please don't be dead Ron, please, get up!" She didn't notice when a death eater came up behind her and pointed a wand straight at her head

"Hello Mud Blood." Said a sly voice that sounded just like Draco Malfoy.

((I know, cliff hanger. If you want a quick update, REVIEW! I promise another chapter as soon as I get another 6 reviews. The chapter will

come either way, but as soon as get to review #70 I'll post the new chap., so it'll be quicker if you review. Thanks everyone!!)

Chapter 16

I have not yet begun to fight!"

-John Paul Jones

Hermione felt every muscle in her body tense. It was Draco Malfoy, her hated school enemy. Oh how she both hated and feared him. She feared him because during her school years he had hurt her worse than anyone. His cruel names he called her, "Mud Blood" being the worst. It magnified all the insecurities she had about being new to the world of magic where everyone else seemed so comfortable. She couldn't think of a worse way of dying than being killed by Draco Malfoy. She hated to think of the joy he would get from her death.

She glanced towards Ron, and saw he was still not moving.

"No one to save you this time Granger. The Weasel King is dead, and Potty died, oh, how long ago now?" He sniggered at his own joke, and she knew he was smirking that detestable smirk. "Turn around Granger." He said, shoving her against the wall and into another alleyway.

She did as he commanded, only so she could spit in his face. "When are you going to stop using baby names for Ron and Harry, Malfoy? Or are those just your pet names for them?" She smirked this time, and as he raised a hand to strike her, he found he could not bring it back down.

A tall dark figure had leaped from the roof of the building and landed gracefully amidst the chaos. He grabbed his enemies arm and pulled it back until it snapped loudly and the blonde ferret cried out in excruciating pain, falling to his knees.

Hermione instantly identified the attacker as none other than Harry Potter, and her heart swelled at the sight of him.

Harry grasped Draco around the neck and lifted him up into the air. Draco gasped and sputtered for air. Hermione cringed at the sight, but suddenly noticed Draco reaching for his wand.

"Drop him Harry." She said in a calm voice, despite the chaos. Harry did as commanded, throwing Draco down hard on the pavement, and turning to stop attacking death eaters.

Draco weakly stretched his good arm out, grasping the wand tightly. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" He yelled, but missed by a long shot, his vision blurry with pain.

"STUPIFY!" Hermione returned, her aim good, but a shield developed around Draco. Draco rose to his feet with much difficulty, uncorked a bottle with his teeth and downed it. Soon his arm felt good as new and he pointed his wand at Hermione with renewed confidence.

"So, Saint Potter isn't so dead is he?" He laughed, their wands pointed at each other as chaos ensued. "Too bad for him Mud Blood, because now he'll have to watch you die."

"You talk to much Draco." Hermione stated, and sent another stupefy hurtling at him he ducked under it, it just grazing his perfect blonde hair.

He quickly recovered, countering it with imperious. Hermione could hear his voice in her head, commanding her to come closer. It seemed to overwhelming in her mind, trying to push her to come walk towards him, but she fought it, keeping her wand out straight. An idea dawned on her, and she followed it.

Lowering her wand she walked towards him, though no longer under imperious. As she approached him he said, "you're too easy Granger. Makes this a lucky day for me though."

As he raised his wand closer to her, she quickly said, "blasphemy." He gave her a confused expression, and then collapsed to the ground with a short screech of pain. He went silent, a glazed expression fixed upon his features.

Hermione port keyed him into the holding cell. He would wake up unable to understand why he was alive. With a serious expression masking inner joy, she left the alleyway and turned back to the battle, which was winding down. She thought with a grim pleasure about the spell she had used on Draco. She had learned it during her studies

for the mission, and it made the person feel as though they'd been stabbed through the center and died. It was a dark and horrible spell, but one she knew he deserved. She had gotten revenge on childhood tormentor.

Just then she remembered the state Ron had been left in. She ran blindly through the dark alley, checking every crumbled body to see if it belonged to Ron. Finally she saw him lying slumped against the pavement, his red hair standing out like a distress beacon. She knelt beside Ron and flipped him on his back. Her hand shot to his neck and searched for a pulse. She pressed down firmly and waited. Suddenly, she felt the small clicking of his pulse beneath her fingers. She breathed a sigh of relief, and rested her head against him as she caught her breathe.

She felt him beginning to stir and he awoke groggily. "Where am I?" He asked, and for a quick moment she'd thought he had been hit by a memory charm. However he soon said, "ugh, I remember now, mind if I decide to just pass back out then?"

She laughed and brushed his red hair away from his eyes for him. "Don't move just yet Ron. You seem to have been hit by something that drained all the energy out of you."

He obeyed her, and laid still, looking exhausted as black half crescents appeared under his eyes.

She looked sadly upon him, knowing they'd need to be moving again shortly. She tried to brighten up, saying, "guess who I took out?"

Ron raised an eyebrow at her before it dropped from lack of energy, and asked, "who?"

"Draco Malfoy." She announced proudly.

"Alright!" Ron said, sounding a bit more like his old self. "Way to go Hermione!"

Just then Hermione caught sight of dark robes and prepared to pull her wand out when she heard Harry say, "Wait Hermione, she's not evil."

Hermione looked up from where she was sitting on the ground to see a woman in dark black robes with black hair and small silver braids standing next to Harry. The woman looked like a death eater, but Hermione trusted Harry enough to listen.

"This is my mentor, and a Sorcerer of the Stars, Altair Aquilla." Harry said, staring hard into her eyes as though inspecting her to make sure she was alright.

Hermione knew all about the Sorcerers of the Stars (of course) and had the situation been different she would have been asking the immortal who was thought to be a myth a thousand questions. Instead she looked at Ron and said, "His energies been drained. Is there anything we can do to get him back in on this or will we have to port key him to Madame Pomfrey?"

Altair kneeled beside Ron in one fluent and graceful motion. She placed her fingers to his temples and he closed his eyes as though thoroughly relaxed. "This may take a little while." Altair told them, and Harry helped Hermione up from her feet.

Once Hermione was up, Harry didn't let go of her hand, and they set off to see who had died and who remained living. They soon found Oliver Wood dead from the killing curse, and Harry port keyed him back to another place entirely, the dungeons. It had been determined that all bodies would be sent there, though they had hoped there'd be none. There was a port key to the dungeon for every one, and it was a sinister thought that yours might be used. They continued around the corner and found Viktor Krum lying on his back, eyes glazed. Hermione grabbed Harry's arm and buried her face against him. Smoothing down her hair and calming her, he went over to Viktor to find a pulse. Just as soon as his fingers brushed Viktor's neck, the young Quidditch player sat up bolt straight and panting, tears streaming down his face.

Once he'd caught his breathe he turned to Harry and said, "It was a nightmare curse." Harry just nodded and helped the poor man up. Hermione gave Viktor a hug, relieved to see he was alive.

"Why don't you take Viktor over towards where the rest of the squad is forming? The death eaters should be back again soon, so we need

to get moving." Harry said, his voice devoid of emotion as it had been when she'd first found him. "I'll go check though the bodies over there."

Hermione looked at Harry with concern. She walked over to him and kissed him. "Harry, remember your promise. I need you to come back to me."

He nodded and stared at her for a moment. Raising a hand he gently touched her cheek. "You'll be fine." He said, and kissing her on the forehead, he turned and headed back down the alley.

Several steps later he stumbled across the bloody and mangled bodies of Justin Finch-Fletchly and Lee Jordan. His stomach took a turn from the grotesque scene, and he quickly portkeyed them away. His heart wanted to grieve over the lost friends, Lee Jordan who was as adopted Weasley Twin as some thought of it, and who Harry knew the twins could not be the same without. However, his brain forbade him from grieving, and he pressed forward. The next group of bodies were death eaters, and finally he came upon the Weasley twins who were just standing up from stooping over.

Seeing Harry, George spoke, "We just sent Cho Chang to Pomfrey."

"How bad was she hurt?" Harry asked, his heart aching for Ron and for Cho who had been Harry's first real girlfriend, however superficial his relationship with her may have been.

"She was hurt pretty bad." Fred answered, "But she'll pull through fine. I suppose we're regrouping?"

Harry nodded and walked with them to the collecting group, a squad which was now down to 15 members. Harry found the Special Task Force and they all continued on their separate mission.

"A man who won't die for something is not fit to live."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

A different sort of engagement was taking place right near the Death Eater club. Muggle guards were being shot off of their patrol by gun

men running about in the dark, led by Chrome Granger. The bombs had been assembled and were about to detonate, but the cover fire the other gang members had needed to use to keep the men setting them up had been costly. A rapid skirmish of gun fire broke out between muggles, and an occasional wizard would send in some curses before being shot down.

Chrome was kneeling down and shooting off anyone who was not part of the mission and came to the alley. He had faced a good squad of armed men a half hour prior to the time, and had lost all the rest of the gun men who's been helping him. Now it was just him and two men putting the final touches on the bomb.

"We're all set." One of them said to him in a heavy Irish accent.

"Good, let's go then." He responded as they drew out their guns. They ran off to the place where the whole gang was supposed to meet once the bombs were ready to be detonated.

A gang of Muggle guards from the club spotted them and set off a volley of shots. One of the men took a bullet to the calf, and hit the ground hard with a long line of vivid profanities.

"Take him to the meet up point." Chrome told the uninjured man. "I'll cover."

The man didn't move, giving Chrome a confused look.

"I SAID GO!" Chrome shouted, showing his malicious side and sending the two men scurrying.

With a machine gun Chrome set to keeping the guards from advancing any further. He took a few down, but more pushed through, and he ran out of ammunition and was forced to take cover.

He let off a stream of vulgar language, cursing everything that came to mind as they drew nearer. He cracked his knuckles and rolled his shoulders. "Time to show them what it means to be a Celtic Warrior" he thought. Stepping out in front of them, unarmed, he took them by surprise. One of the men grabbed for their gun, but Chrome was faster, grabbing the gun from him and pulling the butt of it into the

man's face within the blink of an eye. The contact sent the man flying backwards onto the one behind him. Chrome expertly swiveled the gun around his finger and turned it to face the attacker who was dead in front of him. He shot him and then sent a powerful punch into the next one with a super human strength. Two more men charged him, and he threw his arms out, clothes lining them so hard they flew up into the air and landed on their backs. "Five down, five to go." He thought. All the while he knew that the firecracker had to be sent up and the bombs detonated.

A flurry of bullets was sent his way by machine gun, and he did an easy back flip to take undercover behind a set of concrete stairs. He quickly pulled out his cell phone and called Rex Carlet. "Detonate, and set off the fire cracker." Was all he said, and all he had time to say. A woman slowly rounding the staircase looking for him found him, but she was unable to pull the trigger before he shot.

He rolled out into the middle of the alley way once more, and began to take out the remaining four. Malice and a burning animalistic rage flowed through him, the blood of a warrior. His every punch and reflex was fast, furious and powerful.

After the last one was gone he heard the explosion of the Death Eater's Club and saw the fire works light the air in one large explosion. He ran with incredible speed to the rest of his gang, and drew them over to a one touch port key Dumbledore had set up. He glanced at their dirty and tired faces, each returning gaze filled with admiration and trust.

"That's it boys. Good work, now let's go." They all prepared to touch the port key when Chrome heard the sound of gun fire in the distance.

"WAIT!" He shouted, but it was too late. They were all gone and the rest was up to Chrome.

Chapter 17

"I am only one but I am one. I cannot do everything but I can do something
and I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do."
-Edward Everett Hale

Every group had entered the Death Eater club and begun to battle except for Bill and Charlie's squad. On their forward charge they had had no wizarding attacks, but at the last moment they were ambushed by a group of Muggles. They had immediately used spells to disarm the attackers, but then were pushed to defend themselves from a physical attack. Some defense spells could be used, but too often they found they found themselves trying to fight against the well trained muggles.

A particularly large man with a shaved head and black goatee went after Charlie, sending a hard blow to his jaw. When Bill rushed to help he was kicked hard in the ribs and was on his back gasping for a gulp of air in a split second. One woman who was well trained in a form of martial arts seemed unstoppable. Out of desperation, one of the wizards sent a stunning spell at her. It worked, but the man was suddenly howling in pain, and Bill watched as the poor fool lost all his magic powers.

Everyone had been warned not to attack the Muggles with magic, that only defense spells were allowed. Going against the ancient of muggle safety would result in loss of powers. Of course, this didn't pertain to all wizards. Voldemort for example, could kill or torture Muggles through a magic older than the law of Muggle protection. He would undoubtedly be teaching the method to his Death Eaters and no one would be able to stop him controlling the world. That was, unless they could stop him before then.

A round of gun shot was heard and everyone who could still move scrambled for cover.

As Bill crawled across the pavement on his stomach he muttered aloud, "Why are we so weak to against Muggles?" He took out his wand and disarmed the attackers once more. Then aiming his wand

in front of the attackers he created a large crack in the road which several of the idiots tumbled into. It wasn't using magic directly on them, and the other members of the squad soon caught on, using spells to create holes in the roadway, and blasting pieces of concrete off of the buildings which then rained down on the Muggles.

Just as they began to take the upper hand more guns came out. "WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS!" Bill thought angrily, glancing at the Death Eater club which was looking both very close and too far. A bomb exploded nearby and Bill covered his face as the debris sprayed everywhere. Dust filled the air and he couldn't see anything.

More gun firing was heard. "CHARLIE!" Bill yelled into the dust filled air, hoping to hear a response.

"Yeah?" Came a tired voice, and Charlie stumbled into view, his lip split and bleeding.

"Let's get out of here! We can conjure a fog to cover us as we make a run for the club."

Charlie nodded, and set to spraying a gray smoke from his wand as Bill recollected what remained of the squad.

In a desperate run they all made it to the club, unaware that something other than the fog was covering their backs.

Hermione was at the tail of her squad as they headed into the club. The walls of building were in shambles, and she thought that Chrome had done a grand job of blowing everything up.

She looked off in the distance and saw that Charlie and Bill's squad was just finally making a run for it. She tried to see what they were fleeing from with such vigor, but a fog obscured her view. She heard more gun shots and the fog was beginning to recede. She saw a group of Muggles trying to make their way after the fleeing squad, but one lone man was holding them off. She took out a pair of magic binoculars that Harry had bought her at the Quidditch Cup during the summer before forth year.

She immediately realized that the man was Chrome. She realized that Dumbledore was right, he was good at what he did. He was ruthless, quick to kill and also had reflexes so fast it seemed that he didn't even move his arm and the attackers were on the ground. Unable to watch any longer, she headed into the chaos of the Death Eater club.

"Dust." That was all Ron could comprehend once inside the club. Everywhere dust obscured his view, screams and shouts deafening him. The battle was intense, everywhere things shattered and people cursed. He shot off his own shots but could not be sure who he was hitting. Taking over the club would be no small challenge, but he attacked it with an angry rage and a un- touchable determination.

The Special Task Force had led the Spell Breaking Squad through the club's chaos, but not without difficulty. They covered the squad as they went about their work, and they were done surprisingly fast.

With the barriers removed, the Special Force Task followed Harry into the upstairs casino, they were ambushed by a small group of drunken Death Eaters, but they easily knocked them out. With confident strides they made their way through the casino. The floor was littered with debris from the chaos that had mounted in the room, and it seemed eerily empty as they made their way towards the back room.

Harry felt a swell of anticipation in the pit of his stomach as he neared the back room. It was the very back room he had saved Hermione at, a place filled with an odd assortment of emotion. He had both feared the room, and loved the feeling it brought him, knowing he was right under the so called "best of the best" in death eater's noses. Now that room would lead them to the capture of Voldemort's inner circle, and hopefully, to the Voldemort himself.

With a deep a breath Harry led them around a bend where the two towering guards stood, still posted by the door. One of the guards drew his wand and aimed a killing curse at Harry, who just barely dodged it. With a forward motion of his hand and a mutter of words, Dumbledore sent one of the guards to the ground. Taking advantage of Dumbledore's preoccupation, the other guard sent a killing curse at the head master. Harry quickly summoned a chair to fly through the

air and deflect the shot, and when another curse was fired at him, Altair quickly took charge in killing the guard. They pressed forward to the room. Forcing open the doors they waited for the dust to settle to attack. Then the real dueling commenced.

As Charlie and Bill's squad headed into the club, Chrome fought alone to stop the advancing Muggles.

"Shoot, punch, kick, shoot, punch, kick.. This is getting old." Chrome thought as he fought. A stream of blood was coming from just above his eye, rendering him half blind. He felt himself getting sore and his super human energy was beginning to give out.

"Why am I doing this?" He mumbled out loud as he knocked another attacker of his feet. He didn't know, but he felt he had to keep the Muggles held back for as long as possible. His heart was pounding without mercy against his rib cage, and head throbbed along with it. The fog around him was disappearing and he knew soon he'd be in clear view of all gunmen.

He didn't want to give up however, and stood his ground, knowing it was suicide. "Go down in glory." He thought, though none were watching his heroics, and few would mourn his passing.

As the crack of single gun shot filled his ears, and he fell.

The back room of the casino was like hell let loose. The Death Eaters were fast with their wands, Harry had to give them that. Mad Eye Moody was already down, and Harry didn't know if he was dead or unconscious. Kingsley had a few deep lacerations, and Harry suspected Kingsley would pass out shortly. Dumbledore and Altair were holding their ground, though not without any difficulty, despite how good they were. It came down to the fact that they were outnumbered.

Avery, Malfoy, Farrier, Lestrangle and the others were powerful wizards, and they took much effort to fight.

A calm cool voice split through the chaos and Harry turned towards, to see that it was Altair reciting a powerful spell. A vacuum seemed to come up behind the Death Eaters, sucking them back. Harry watched

with confusion, as Altair stood there, robes blowing wildly about her and foreign words coming from her mouth.

"She cannot maintain the spell for much longer." Harry said, his voice coming smooth and even from behind Harry, tinted with a heart felt sorrow. "We must press forward towards Voldemort." Dumbledore glanced back at Kingsley, who was still standing. They exchanged brief nods and Harry ran out towards a panel in the wall. Harry had seen the top Death Eaters enter the hidden passage numerous times, and he was sure that it would bring them closest to Voldemort.

Harry coughed from the dust that filled his lungs as he put his hand flat against the panel. "Destructo." He said, and with a powerful blast of splintering wood, the panel was gone and a pitch black room lay before them. Harry looked back at Kingsley, who was preparing to port key any on the Death Eaters to prison, as Altair's spell faded away. Harry turned into the darkness, and Dumbledore followed at his heels.

As they came into the room, Harry conjured a bluish ball of light in the palm of his hand, raising it to observe his surrounding. Everything was so silent; he could hear his own irregular breaths filling his ears, seeming incredibly loud. "I don't think he's here." Harry whispered to Dumbledore.

Saying nothing, Dumbledore headed directly to sheet covered object that Harry had failed to see in the corner of the room. He lifted the sheet, and a gold glow immediately filled the room.

Harry stared down at the object which looked like a glass orb on a stand, filled with a bright gold mist.

"Of course, the Death Eaters never talked with Voldemort directly, they communicated with a seeing orb." Harry said, recognizing the object. His voice filled with a sort of weary fatigue, feeling stupid for having thought they could have found Voldemort so easily.

Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. They were no longer the thin and boney shoulders of a young boy. They were the well muscled shoulders of a man who had suffered every burden. Harry's

shoulders had carried the world, and Harry needed to lift that burden. However, the dark lord had eluded them once again. Dumbledore found he had no words of consolation for the young man.

They stood in the darkness, only the orb lighting their surroundings. They let silence reign, unsure of what to do next.

Just then Harry heard a creek of the floor boards, a sound Dumbledore was too old to have heard. Dumbledore was wise, but he had not fought for his life on the streets as Harry had, and did not have Harry's reflexes. Before the old man could turn, a sharp cold sting hit him in the back with a sickening thud. Without having time to comprehend that he'd been stabbed by a throwing knife, the weapon caused him to port key away, leaving Harry alone.

"Looks like it's you and me Potter" said a snake like voice.

"I guess so Riddle." Harry said back.

Chapter 18

"Cowards die many times before their deaths;

The valiant never taste of death but once."

-William Shakespeare

Kingsley had rounded up all the inner circle members and sent them off to prison by port key. When he was finished, Altair gave him a short nod and disappeared. She had traveled as far as the heavens had commanded her to go, and she was ready to return back to the House of the Heavens.

When Kingsley saw her leave he gaped at the spot she'd been standing. "Bloody typical" he muttered, knowing that Sorcerers of the Stars only went as far as they had to. "How convenient for the immortals that they can just disappear and reappear as they wish" he grumbled. He knew what he needed to do next: get the attacking squads the hell out of there. They'd suffered enough casualties, and Harry and Dumbledore would be able to find their own way out if they defeated Voldemort.

Placing a charmed whistle in his mouth he blew it loud and clear. It was designed to reach the ears of all members of the fighting squads, despite the noise surrounding them. The sound of the whistle was the found of the retreat, and he ran from the casino to the down stairs of the club blowing into the metal whistle.

Hermione was in the process of dueling woman with flaming red hair when she heard the whistle. "PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!" She yelled, feeling her voice grow hoarse from the shouting and the dust. She left the woman laying on the ground and headed out the way she had entered. She knew the exit had to be orderly, and she grabbed Ron and the twins on their way out to help her cover the backs of the retreating fighters, and to keep the order so nobody would be trampled.

They fired curses back and forth, and Hermione was finding it particularly difficult to hit one of the Death Eaters whose agility was

allowing him to dodge back and forth between tables, firing curses each time. One of the curses hit Fred Weasley in the eye, and he went down in a shriek of pain. Hermione was relieved to see that almost everyone was out, but she still couldn't hit the one Death Eater that was causing them problems.

As the last of their fighters left, Hermione was able to reduce one of the tables the Death Eater was using for cover into splinters, and then stupefy him.

"Let's get the bloody hell out of here!" Ron said, his voice squeaking a bit with fear, reminding Hermione of their Hogwarts days. George helped Fred to his feet, and Hermione saw that the curse he had taken had left him in a very weak and injured state, with blood covering his eye region. Ron supported Fred on the other side and they headed off, Hermione taking up the rear. She looked over to the staircase where she knew Harry had gone, desperately hoping to see him come running down the steps, but he did not, and she knew he may not be returning to base for quite some time, if ever. Her stomach began to hurt with a nervous pain, but she pressed forward. Soon they would return to Hogwarts to ascertain exactly how much damage their forces had obtained.

"Don't call me by the name of my dirty Muggle father!" Voldemort spat, and Harry just smirked, raising his hand level with his nemesis.

Voldemort could tell that Harry had grown more powerful. There were no more baby fits of anger from the young man, nor any hiding or uncertainty. They were both set on one thing: fulfilling the prophecy.

Voldemort attacked first, using the killing curse. Harry's arm quickly pointed to the ceiling, and a chunk of plaster fell, blocking the curse.

"You'll need to do better than that." Harry said, his voice even.

Voldemort laughed a hollow laugh. "I was about to say the same."

Then all hell broke loose. Curses whizzed through the air and the two wizards dodged and block with super speed. One of the walls was made of a thick oak, but when a curse meant for Harry missed him, the wall erupted in splinters, most of the fragments bouncing off of

Harry's jacket, but one catching him on the cheek and drawing blood. Harry jumped up into the air as a curse passed under his legs, and he landed in the next room over through the opening Voldemort had created. Landing in the pile of rubble, Harry launched curse at Voldemort which knocked the snake off his feet.

Harry had Voldemort on his back, and that was just the way he wanted him.

As Ron and George rushed Fred to the hospital wing, Hermione searched for Minerva McGonagal to get a damage report.

Hermione found McGonagal pale and flustered in the Great Hall, pacing about and for the first time ever, looking completely lost.

Shocked, Hermione went up to her and placed her hand lightly on McGonagal's shoulder. "Professor?"

McGonagal jumped up into the air as though she'd just seen a ghost. "Oh. Hermione dear. it's you.I" rambling, she stopped abruptly and lost her balance, nearly falling before Hermione balanced her out and helped her into a seat.

"Professor, are you alright? Maybe you should go see Madame Pomfrey."

McGonagal looked as though she hadn't heard a word of what Hermione had said, and was staring off into nothingness. Finally she said in a soft tone, "call me Minerva dear, after all, you don't go to Hogwarts any longer."

Hermione was growing frightened. It seemed as though the Headmistress had gone into shock, and Hermione didn't know what to do about it. "What's wrong?" Hermione asked, her voice sounding small and scared.

Suddenly, McGonagal looked as though she had been slapped awake, straightening up and looking Hermione directly in the eye. "Headmaster Dumbledore is in the hospital wing."

"What?!" Hermione exclaimed, jumping up.

"You know who stabbed a port key into him, and it sent Albus to some cold and snowy region, we aren't sure where. Any other wizard would surely have died, but not Albus. However, he is in critical condition, apparating under such circumstances is very dangerous."

Hermione gasped, to think that her beloved Head Master was nearly killed. Then the larger implications hit her. "What about the Special Task force? How can they kill Voldemort without Dumbledore? There's only four of them now!"

Minerva McGonagal stood up, and helped Hermione to sit down this time. "Actually, there's only one. Harry Potter is our last hope."

Harry saw a life of pain and torture flash before his eyes as he prepared to kill Voldemort. Life's terrors had been created at the hands of this one evil deranged man, and now that stain to the Earth was about to be erased forever.

"Avada Kedavra" Harry said with a firm persistence, but nothing happened. The curse passed right through the evil lord. Something hard hit Harry in the side of the head, causing a jolt of white to blur his vision and stumble to the floor.

Voldemort rose from the dust and rubble and looked at Harry. "Time to complete what I should have finished 18 years ago."

Not prepared to die, Harry quickly summoned a strong wind which swept through the room, tossing the dust in the air and blinding both men from each other. This bought Harry time to rise to his feet, but now he looked about madly to try to see his opponent.

"Where are you Riddle?" He cursed, squinting in the dust to try to see the man he craved to kill. He staggered through the storm of dust, his head pounding and the open cut on his cheek stinging from the fibers that now filled the gash. He stumbled over a piece of wood, and out of no where he felt another board connect with his temple. As soon as he fell to the ground he kicked hard in the direction of his attacker, and felt his boot make contact with body. He listened as Voldemort crashed to the ground from the kick and pointed his arm while calming the wind into nothingness.

He had expected to see Voldemort lying there but instead saw nothing. He looked about wildly, before looking down at the necklace hanging around his neck- the gift from Hermione. He noticed that the lion's eyes were growing red. danger was very close. He tried to listen for the snake lord, concentrating so hard his ears began to ring.

What he heard was, "Avada Kedavra."

Hermione felt her world go dark. She began to shake, her nerves taking over as her breathes became short and erratic. "No.no." She whispered. "He'll be. he can beat." unable to form full sentences she laid her head down on the table, finding no tears would form.

"I'm sure he will." Was all McGonagal could say, her voice sounding distant. "And. never mind. You need rest dear. Why don't you go up to the room you've been staying in."

Hermione shook her head adamantly. For one, she had been in that room with Harry just the previous night, and all his things were still there. She couldn't see finding rest there. Furthermore, she needed to know what McGonagal had to say. "Please Professor, continue with what you were going to say. I'm fine."

McGonagal looked skeptical, but felt that there was no use in holding back from the inevitable. "Ms. Granger, it's about your brother."

Chrome awoke groggily in a strange bed. He was surrounded by white curtains that hurt his eyes. He'd always preferred the dark. He reopened his eyes, but much more slowly, letting them adjust. He could hear the scamper of feet outside the curtains, and the shouts of voices.

"Why am I still alive?" He mused, and suddenly became conscious of a severe pain on his side. He groaned in discomfort, and a young man in white robes came to his bed side.

"Do you have a ton of pain killers? I don't just mean the pill sorts, I mean, say, do they still use morphine?" He asked, half delirious in his pain.

"What?! You're speaking nonsense!" The young man stuttered, swishing his wand at Chrome to check for a fever. Finding none he shrugged and turned to the bed side to fill up a cup of pain relieving potion.

"Only in your world." Chrome snarled back. "And you're taking an awfully long time with the little drink over there. I just hope it's a strong whiskey."

The young man gave him an odd look and brought the cup over to Chrome. Chrome tried to raise his arms, but a severe pain jolted through him, giving him split vision. The young man brought the cup to his lips for him instead, and Chrome drank it down.

"Terrible isn't it?" Said a voice he didn't recognize.

"I've had worse." He admitted, wondering who it was.

"Ah, Professor McGonagal, so glad you're here, this man doesn't have a fever, but he's speaking complete nonsense." The young man said, and Chrome thought he ought to kick the boy in the mouth once he could move again.

"That's Chrome, always speaking nonsense." Said a sad sounding voice he did recognize.

"Hermione." He whispered, smiling a bit. So she had made it out. Furthermore, she had come to see how he was doing, a gesture he was thankful for.

Hermione dismissed the other two and sat at Chrome's bedside. She went off into a daze, trying to wrap her mind around everything that was happening. Harry loved her, that she knew, and he'd promised he'd try his hardest to survive. However, not everything was in his hands, and now it was all completely out of her hands. She touched her fingers to the ring he'd given her, but instead of offering a warm feeling of security, it felt cold, hard and metallic, a reminder of what she might lose.

Chrome was relieved to feel the pain going away, and with it he began to grow drowsy. He didn't notice Hermione's distress, and let his heavy eye lids drop closed.

Ron had helped George deliver Fred to the medi wizards and then set out to find Cho. Finding a young wizard emerging from behind white curtains he stopped him to ask where he could find Cho Chang. Once he received the directions that her ward was located in the Transfiguration classroom he headed there. As he traveled the familiar stone corridors he turned the corner quickly and crashed head on into his mother.

"Ronald!" She cried with joy, tears pouring down her face. She pulled him into a rib crushing embrace, and he gasped for breathe.

"Is something wrong mum? Is dad okay? How about Ginny, Charlie and."

Mrs. Weasley cut him off, "oh they're all fine dear, besides scrapes and bruises. Of course Fred is in the hospital wing right now, but he'll pull through well enough. I'm just to happy to see you're still walking around, oh Ron, I was so worried!"

"I know you were mum, don't worry, I'm fine. I was just going to see Cho. Uh, Hermione's fine by the way. I don't exactly know where she is, but she got here. Is everyone else back yet?"

Mrs. Weasley gulped, "Ron dear, perhaps you ought to sit down."

Ron just raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue.

"Only Dumbledore and Harry made it to the face off with you know who. Dumbledore's back here, but he's badly wounded."

"And Harry? What about Harry mum?" Ron felt panicky, as though a bunch of enormous spiders were after him. He couldn't find his best friend and then lose him. It wasn't right it wasn't fair, it just wasn't possible.

"Last we know he was facing You Know Who alone."

Ron gulped and turned pale. "Well. we'll go back won't me? Hermione and I at least, we can help him!"

"No Ron!" Mrs. Weasley said harshly. Then softening her tone said, "I'm afraid you can't do that. It'd be impossible for you to survive getting past the Death Eaters that are still lurking around there."

Ron looked lost, his eyes darting about wildly, "but, we have to do something! I mean, you know who's powerful, and."

"Harry's very powerful now too Ron." His mother said, trying to sooth him.

Ron nodded, looking resigned. "Yes, I suppose you're right mum."

"Go to Cho" she said, tears rolling down her cheeks, reaching up to ruffle Ron's hair in a loving gesture. As Ron went down the hall, Mrs. Weasley fell against the wall sobbing. Harry was a son to her, she could remember him as an eleven year old boy, trying to find his way to platform nine and three quarters. Harry had always been like that, being forced to take care of himself. Harry had taken care of himself with the Dursleys, and had tried to take every burden onto himself at Hogwarts. He had taken it onto himself to leave Hogwarts after fifth year so no one else would be hurt, and he had taken care of himself by becoming a powerful wizard. He was always burdened, and she was amazed at the way he had managed. She had even seen him smile several times during order meetings, though she knew a lot of that had to do with Hermione. He had managed so many burdens, but she wasn't sure he could manage this one.

The darkest hours in troubled times are not the hours spent battling our internal or external demons. They are not the hours where we plan for our attacks, when we ponder our responses. The darkest hours are the hours spent waiting, sitting in a blind uncertainty. The darkest hours are those we spend in a sort of limbo, stuck between the heaven that was better times, and the hell that is sure to come.

The darkest hours for the resistance group to Lord Voldemort and his followers were not the hours during battle. During battle their minds were too muddled to feel the pain and uncertainty surrounding them.

The darkest hours were in the time spent waiting to hear of Harry Potter's fate.

Chapter 19

"Because I could not stop for Death --

He kindly stopped for me --

The carriage held but just ourselves

And immortality."

-Emily Dickinson

Those who knew and loved the Boy Who Lived never thought he could become the boy who died. He had been so much stronger than all of that in the past, and it had become their opinion that he would always prevail.

But he did not. The day after Christmas, Harry Potter fell as his parents had 18 years before. Voldemort hit him in the back with the Avada Kedavra curse, and he ceased to exist.

Voldemort twisted his mouth into a wicked grin, as he determined that the Boy Who Lived was dead. "I have just the place for you Mr. Potter" he said, his voice bursting with cheer.

When Harry didn't return for almost 24 hours, everyone was becoming acutely aware of the fact that he may not have survived.

Chrome woke up to find that Hermione had dropped off to sleep purely out of exhaustion. Her head was on his bed, her body still in the chair. Chrome grew concerned, and realized he still couldn't sit up to help her. He stretched his arm over to the bedside table and grabbed a tin cup. Carefully watching the curtain in front of him, he waited until a shadow passed and launched the cup at it, hitting the person through the sheet with dead accuracy.

"Ow- DAMNIT!" He heard the voice curse, and the person entered Chrome's curtained area.

"Should've figured it was you" scowled the young medi wizard whom Chrome recognized as the same one who had cared for him earlier. "You could have just yelled if you needed something."

"I can't, it hurts to move my stomach muscles." Chrome told him, and then indicating Hermione said, "Find her a place to sleep."

"You don't own me." The medi wizard pompously spat, and Chrome picked up a glass bottle of medication this time, pretending he would throw it in order to get the little brat moving.

Soon Hermione was levitated into another room of the hospital wing, still sleeping. Even in her nightmares she didn't know that Harry was dead.

Ron had climbed into bed with Cho who was mostly all healed and had been sleeping when a nightmare about spiders awoke him. Seeing that the sun was setting, and that he had gone to sleep at four o'clock that morning, he realized he'd been sleeping for over 12 hours. He tried to readjust his mind, and it struck him that Harry was unaccounted for. He cursed himself for falling asleep and quickly stood up to find anyone who might know what had happened to him.

Running down the hallways, Ron crashed into a tired looking Remus Lupin. "Remus!" Ron gasped, "Have you heard from Harry?!"

Remus gave Ron a long and tired look. "I'm afraid not Ron." He said in a barely audible whisper. Remus then resumed his way down the hall, swaggering with exhaustion.

Standing cemented in his spot, Ron's mind raced with a thousand thought. Then he took off in a full sprint to find Hermione. After asking around he found her sleeping, and with no consideration to how tired she was, he woke her up.

Looking around frantically as though under attack, Ron redirected her attention to himself.

"Damn, I can't believe I fell asleep!" Tears began pouring down her cheeks, "and with Harry. out, I mean honestly, I'm so foolish!"

"It's okay Hermione, so did I." Ron soothed. "But he still isn't back."

Her eyes shot wide open with alarm. He mentally slapped himself for being so forward, but he was so panicked he wasn't thinking straight.

"No. it can't be." she felt herself going into shock all over. She laid down and stared at the ceiling.

Ron laid down next to Hermione and looked up the ceiling also. "We'll just have to wait and see."

"For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,

And breathed in the face of the foe as he pass'd;

And the eyes of the sleepers wax'd deadly and chill,

And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!"

-George Gordon Byron

Those of the Order and their allies waited until the first of the new year to find the answer to the fate of their friend and hero. The wizarding world was thrown into a shock of unprecedented horror when the new sun rose upon the Diagon Alley on the first day of a year that would be dark and filled with war. The omen of terrible a upcoming was read clearly by all who opposed Voldemort.

Harry Potter's body hung in Diagon Alley, clearly out in the open to all those who went into the once bright and cheery alley. Soon the press would be swarming through the area, and the entire wizard world would know what had happened to their last hope. The Order of the Phoenix had to intervene to remove Harry's body from prying eyes of the reporters.

All who remained innocent in the encroaching darkness began to feel the depression of the war, but their lives did not stop. There were only few who felt everything come crashing to a halt.

The affirmation of Harry's death came to Ron Weasley at the crack on dawn as the sun was rising on the new year. He hadn't slept since

Harry went missing, and he'd barely eaten. He was sitting on a bench in the Hogwarts courtyard, shelling peanuts because it was one of the few foods he could keep his nerves from up heaving and they kept his hands occupied. He watched as an Auror approached and went to stand but felt too weak.

The Auror watched Ron Weasley as he approached and was surprised the red head was such an admired commander from the Order of the Phoenix. All the Auror could see was a thin skeleton of a young man, with messy red hair and black shining bags beneath his eyes. Ron looked translucent, ready to collapse.

The Auror geared himself for relaying the terrible news, and the world felt surreal, like a terrible inescapable nightmare.

"Mr. Ronald Weasley?" The Auror asked in a husky voice.

"Yes, that's me." Ron responded.

"We just received report that Harry Potter is dead."

Ron looked at the Auror silently, and finally a single tear trickled down his pale cheek, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. "Who else knows?"

"It will be in the Daily Prophet soon." The Auror said, his voice sympathetic. "But as of now only the ministry knows and I'm here to tell the rest of the Order the news."

"Let me tell them." Ron whispered softly. "You can tell your superior that the news was received. Thank- you."

The Auror looked ready to protest, but Ron just turned his back to him and walked away. "Trust me, its better this way."

It was the hardest moment in his life. He didn't know what was happening, couldn't wrap his mind around it, and yet he was on his way to relay the message to someone just beyond that door.

He knew she loved Harry. He could feel it, sense it, whatever it was, that gave him this deep empathetic understanding of how Hermione

loved the raven haired man. "Yes," Ron decided "Harry was defiantly a grown man. He was never taught to be a child." The Dursleys had raised Harry to be a man, perfect and silent, with not so much as a faint scent of childishness about him. If Harry was ever a child, free to play, love and be loved, Ron suspected it was with him, Hermione and Sirius. None of that mattered now though. Sirius was dead, Harry was dead, and all Ron had to do was get through the stupid bloody door and tell Hermione.

With trembling hands he grasped the door knob and turned. She turned her head to him, her eyes unfocused, as though she was not really seeing him. "Hermione?" Ron asked in a weak voice.

She turned her eyes upwards until they met his. Then he saw it. She knew. She looked right into his eyes and that was all it took. It was one thing to be told that his best friend had died, but it was even worse to watch his other best friend die before his eyes. And that was what Ron watched happen. Hermione was breathing and moving, but in her eyes he could see she was dead.

"Don't-" he whispered, suddenly scared, but she cut him off as she stood up with surprising rapidity. She walked straight at him and he jumped to the side to avoid being knocked over. She took a right and headed down the hall.

"Hermione!" Ron cried. "Where are you going?!"

She merely increased her pace, and he had to jog to catch up with her. He reached out to touch her arm to stop her, but she shrugged him off and began to run full speed down the hallway.

Ron was so exhausted, and as he chased her he couldn't understand where her energy came from. As she turned another corner, he realized she was headed for the hospital wing.

"HERMIONE, NO!" Ron yelled with all the energy he could muster, but she seemed to be deaf to him.

She fled into the hospital wing, blindly crashing into various workers until she found the area she was looking for. She opened the door to

the private little room, and it slammed against the wall with an echoing volume.

Stopping dead she muttered, "You let him die."

The sickly old man pushed himself up in the bed, his sparkling blue eyes devoid of all cheer.

"He was too young, you knew he was too young! The mission was suicide!" She was beginning to yell now, and tears finally formed in her eyes.

"He said he would try his best to come back, and I bet he did, but he couldn't do it alone! YOU LEFT HIM!" She was growing hysterical, and Ron had finally caught up with her. She weakly tried to lunge forward, but Ron grabbed her and pulled her back. Her tightened his arms around her as she began to sag to the floor, crying in heart breaking sobs. Ron soon found he was crying as well, and they sat on the floor holding each other, as Dumbledore lay there saying nothing, tears streaming down his cheeks as well.

"If my survival caused another to perish, then death would be sweeter and more beloved."

-Kahlil Gibran

"Harry, you were a hero to so many. You were their inspiration, their guiding light, their idol of perfection. You weren't perfect, but you were so much more." Lupin took a deep staggering breath and continued.

"You were the star of the Quidditch field. You were the honorary son in a family that loved you as their own." He stopped and looked at the Molly and Arthur Weasley.

"Your best friend would be separated from your side only in death." He looked at Ron, a pale statue against the grey sky.

"You could remember no love, but you loved and were loved like unlike any other." Lupin looked at Hermione, broken on the inside, unmoving on the outside.

"You captured the affection and admiration of even the wisest." A glimpse at Dumbledore was about all Lupin could bear, and his voice grew broken, tears seeping out from their containment.

"We'll miss you Harry, but we know that you aren't alone. Sirius Black and your parents were so proud of you in life, and you are theirs again. Until we see you in death, we know you are not alone."

Remus Lupin stepped back into the morbid funeral crowd, not knowing how wrong he was in his final sentence.

((So there it is. Yes, I know, I killed Harry. Don't flame me for it, just read the sequel which I'll be posting soon: ASHES OF THE PHOENIX. Please don't let that stop you from reviewing. I want opinions, feedback on the story as a whole. How were the fighting scenes, what characters did/ didn't you like, who do you want more of, what do you want more of? Feed back is the only way I can be aware of what you think of my fic. THANK YOU ALL!!)